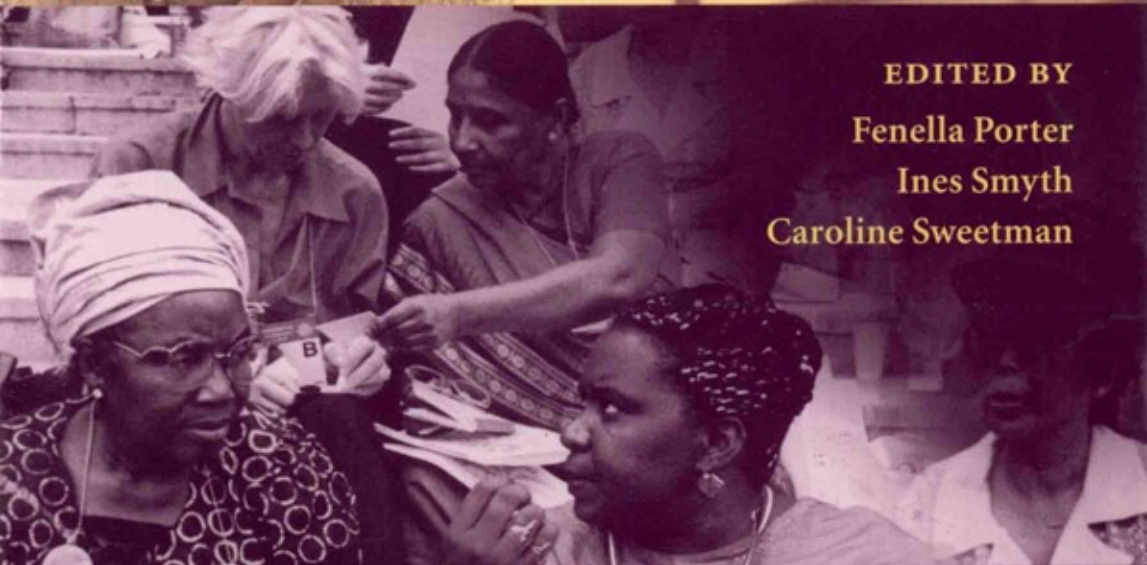
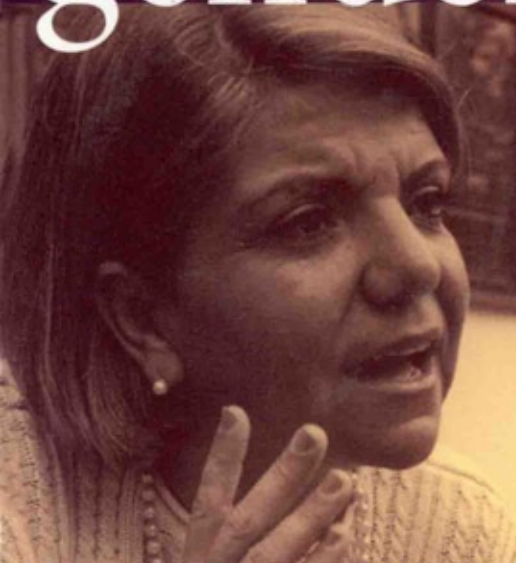


gender works

OXFAM EXPERIENCE IN
POLICY AND PRACTICE



EDITED BY
Fenella Porter
Ines Smyth
Caroline Sweetman

An Oxfam Publication

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Oxfam

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Preface

David Bryer

Gender Works is the latest in a line of publications from Oxfam GB on gender and development issues, charting the ways in which Oxfam GB's staff and partners have taken action to combat women's poverty and marginalisation around the world. This book marks a milestone in the long journey towards our goal of making our work, and our own organisation, work for women. We have a long way to travel still, but the debates included here bear witness to the importance of development workers and their organisations taking seriously the message of gender researchers, workers, and activists throughout the world, who urge us to practise what we preach.

A concern for women's poverty has informed Oxfam's work with communities since early in its history. This was shaped in 1984 into an explicit recognition that we needed to promote women's right to equal access to power, assets, and resources. In the following year, a specialist gender function, the Gender and Development Unit (GADU) was established at Oxfam's head office. It provided support, advice, and training to Oxfam's international programme, while lobbying work continued inside and outside the organisation to ensure that our commitment to gender concerns was rendered sustainable through a formal policy agreement. In 1993, almost a decade after GADU was set up, Oxfam's organisational Gender Policy was agreed. Our organisation was among the first Northern-based non-government funding agencies to embrace a concrete, formal commitment to the rights and welfare of women throughout the world.

During this process, Oxfam GB has become well-known for its commitment to integrating a concern for women's rights and gender equality into its programme work. The stages in our journey have been mapped by a succession

of well-known publications, including *Changing Perceptions* and *The Oxfam Gender Training Manual*. *Gender Works*, like its forerunners, is a book of its time; it reflects the current emphasis on institutional analysis, since we are now aware that who 'we' in development organisations are has a direct impact on the value of the work we do. The time is ripe to debate which values need to underpin global development. A value-free, unregulated, 'globalised' economy is never going to deliver the just and fair development that we wish to promote in South and North. The 36 writers in this book, who come from every region of the globe, argue that all involved in development must be aware of the three cultural contexts in which we operate. The first is the geographical and historical location of our work; the second, our own personal experience; and the third, easily overlooked, belongs to our organisation itself. Not only do the underlying values and power relations of our society shape us personally, but they also influence the ethos, assumptions, structures, systems and procedures of our organisations.

The diverse voices in this book provide a wealth of information and a wide array of different opinions on the opportunities, and the obstacles, which writers have encountered along the way to a common goal. This goal is to achieve development programmes which enable women to meet not only all their material requirements in their many roles as producers and carers for their families and the wider community, but the less tangible development aims of freedom, justice, self-determination, and knowledge.

Agreeing Oxfam GB's Gender Policy was the first step our organisation took in mounting a serious challenge to male bias in our development work. This book records key moments in the process of transforming this significant commitment into a living reality. While priorities and approaches to development are continually being re-cast, as a response to new realities, organisations such as Oxfam GB must change, but remain faithful to their core motivation: that of struggling against injustice and its causes. Learning about the successes and failures of our struggle vis-à-vis women, through the insights offered in this book, paves the way for renewing our efforts towards fighting against 'gender injustice' worldwide.

Oxford, 1999

Introduction

Fenella Porter, Ines Smyth, and Caroline Sweetman

This book is a multi-authored contribution to development debates on gender, focusing on the experience of Oxfam GB over the past 15 years. The book has evolved through a participatory process of consultation with staff throughout Oxfam's development programme and beyond. This is described more fully later in the Introduction. Authors include women and men from South and North, based in different locations throughout the world. Most of them work for Oxfam GB and its partner organisations, including other Oxfams from different countries, while a few are former employees of Oxfam or work as consultants. Together, the authors chart their personal perceptions of the experience of Oxfam GB in its progress on turning policy into practice on gender issues: combating women's poverty, and working to promote equality between women and men. The points of view expressed here are those of the individual authors. The fact that this book includes insights from many different perspectives reminds us that no organisation has a monolithic culture; rather, they are contradictory and paradoxical.

The context of this book

Over the past ten years, the attention of gender and development theorists and practitioners has increasingly emphasised the importance of 'getting institutions right for women in development' (Goetz 1995). The rationale for analysing institutions (including not only our own organisations, but also the household, the state, and others) from a gender perspective has been that development can

only have a beneficial outcome for women when the working culture, structure, systems and procedures, and underlying values of the institutions which shape women's lives themselves reflect a concern for gender equity. As Aruna Rao and Rieky Stuart among others have asserted, 'we need to think more deeply about organisations themselves. Trying to 'add gender' into their structure and work is not enough; we need to understand and re-conceptualise what an organisation is, and then we need to re-invent organisations and institutions of all kinds in all our societies' (Rao and Stuart 1997, p.10).

This organisational stocktaking exercise in which gender and development workers have been engaged occurs against the backdrop of a long history. Since the UN Decade for Women began in 1975, development practice has been profoundly challenged by feminist thought and action, and significant progress has been made. Feminists are now widely recognised for their work questioning the 'ideal' of the family and household as beyond the concern and jurisdiction of public-policy makers, as a private space where development workers have no business to pry. Paying particular interest to events in the kitchen and bedroom, they identified and problematised profoundly unequal power relations between women and men at the level of the household, which affect and inform social relations beyond it.

Another main line of feminist enquiry and action has focused on recognising the links between what goes on within the household and its implications for women's participation in the 'public sphere' of production and decision-making. Feminist economists have criticised the lack of attention paid by mainstream economists to women's vast and uncounted contribution to economic growth, through the unpaid work of caring for the family, and for ignoring the link between this unpaid work and women's ability to engage in employment, income-generation, and other productive activities. Feminists have challenged received wisdom in many other areas of development, including the segmentation and stratification of the labour market, the dilemmas of reproduction and the controls exercised over women's sexuality and fertility (particularly in population policies), and legislation which precludes women's access to property. However, despite the widespread publicity given to these insights worldwide, it has been a long hard task for feminists located within development organisations to change the design of policy and practice in organisations.

The early 1980s saw an emerging critique of the assumption that NGOs with developmental aims, such as Oxfam GB, were more inherently 'virtuous' than the vast multilateral organisations, including the UN agencies and the international financial institutions (IFIs) (Tendler 1982). At its most simplistic, this stereotype had depicted NGOs as benign deliverers of development to marginalised people. From a feminist perspective, this stereotype has been further challenged: the

majority of NGOs reflect ‘male bias’ as surely as other organisations, and, like them, have largely failed to ‘deliver development’ to women (Elson 1991).

Building on this analysis, feminist research into NGO policy and practice has paid increasing attention to organisations’ cultural contexts, and their internal cultures; tracing how these organisational cultures are linked to procedures and personnel policies; identifying the problem of male bias in all these areas, and the extent to which this undermines women’s participation and the perceived value of their contribution. There is a clear link between the participation of women and minorities in organisations, and the success of our work with women in communities. Transforming the lives of women living in poverty will not come about until the male biases inherent in our organisations are identified and addressed.

The articles in this book are Oxfam’s contribution to this wider debate, making the connection between the work we do, and who we are. While some articles address these theoretical issues explicitly, others focus more directly on the practical experience of the authors. The many views of contributors to this book form a rich, diverse, and sometimes conflictual set of analytical case studies of the process of getting Oxfam ‘right’ for women.

Celebrating success and learning from failure

As we discuss later in this Introduction, even when they appear peaceful and unified, in reality organisations are rife with debate, dissent, and conflict. The book as a whole aims to capture good practice on gender issues in our development work, and within Oxfam’s organisational structure itself. Many of the articles rightly celebrate successes. Authors from many different parts of the world confirm that gender does indeed ‘work’, and that Oxfam deserves much of its reputation for innovatory and inspiring work on gender over the years. For example, the article by Visha Padmanabhan tells of the transformation of an entire country programme from reactive technical fixes to a community-based development programme founded on values of equality between the sexes. On the other side of the South-North divide, Geraldine Terry discusses how gender analysis developed in the South is being used to enrich anti-poverty work in Britain. At an international level, gender analysis is used to challenge macro-economic policy through effective lobbying, as the articles by Lucy Muyoyeta and by Lydia Williams of Oxfam America show. Other articles present a more mixed picture, but nevertheless show real progress in the face of enormous challenges.

However, the book also includes articles focusing on what has not worked so well. In doing this, writing and editing this book is a brave (and some may say a rash!) attempt to meet another goal much discussed in development circles — that of organisational ‘transparency’, in the sense of giving details of failures as well as successes, in the interests of accountability to all who have a stake in our

work. This is one of the more unusual elements of the book, and will, we hope, contribute to the development of better development practice both inside and outside our own organisation.

Key issues in this book

Continuous change: the gender perspective

Change is the context for all our work, and a central theme of this book. This book is itself a testimony to the hard work of many committed women and men who have engaged with the threats and opportunities presented by upheavals both inside and outside Oxfam, as well as the slower changes occurring in the wider context of societies in which we work. Writers show that change is both an opportunity for organisations to take on gender issues, or potentially an excuse for gender issues to be 'lost'. For example, as this book goes to press, a new way of working, using common 'strategic change objectives' is being introduced into Oxfam — and an explicit objective on gender issues has been included, despite suggestions from some that the struggle to integrate gender issues into our organisation is now complete. There will be other such moments in future.

On the plus side, change processes can represent opportunities to ensure that gender work remains relevant, innovative and challenging in development processes. Many of the articles here show how gender advocates have transformed themselves and their location to keep up with the constantly changing character of Oxfam and development work, bringing new and challenging perspectives to each 'era'. The current interest in networking and 'harmonising' the work of our organisation with that of others in the family of Oxfams has rejuvenated debates and analysis in each member organisation.

More widely, entering a dialogue with women's movements throughout the world has been an exciting and profoundly challenging process for many within Oxfam. Internationally, the women's movements have been enormously successful in harnessing change to positive effect; this work has brought about transformations in the thought and practice of societies in South and North. The activities of the international women's movement have provided vital support and inspiration for feminists like us working within development organisations as they cope with changing contexts within and outside their organisations. Together, we have engaged in a dialogue which is sometimes difficult, but always creative and challenging.

However, change also presents a potential threat. It is during processes of internal change, such as structural change or cutbacks in resources, that gender expertise and commitment to women's rights is often lost, or at least marginalised.

These changes are most often spurred on by unplanned changes in the external context, such as economic recession or a change of government, which oblige organisations to scale down or modify their activities; development agencies are no exception. Gender-sensitive development or relief work is endangered if gender-related work is seen as an optional 'add-on' perspective, which is inessential in situations where resources are scarce. This is a fundamental misconception: good quality development or relief work must be based on an understanding of how social relations operate to disadvantage marginalised groups in society, including women. As Ines Smyth has observed elsewhere, 'insecurity has a personal dimension, in that it is experienced differently and to varying degrees by each individual. But it has also a structural dimension, since the overall conditions under which people live can eliminate or at least reduce such insecurity, or exacerbate it' (Smyth 1995, p.6). Development organisations which successfully work to promote women's rights and interests need to be part of the positive forces which assist women living in poverty to cope, and to harness change.

Some contributors to this book express a profound unease with the outcome of many recent processes of organisational change, viewing these as contrary to the values of feminism and gender equality. Oxfam has attempted to meld the 1980s trend to increased organisational 'professionalism' with the values of egalitarianism, altruism, and commitment to fighting poverty and injustice which have shaped its work since its inception as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief in 1942. Some writers in this book see the gradual evolution of the specialised team at the centre of Oxfam — which started as an advisory unit formed on co-operative principles and re-formed as a team in a hierarchically-managed structure — as representing these changes in microcosm. Others disagree that there was ever such a 'golden age' of gender in our organisation. What is certain is that, over the past 15 years of Oxfam GB's formal engagement with gender issues, there has been an important shift in the way gender issues are understood and accepted in development work. The principles of equality between women and men, and working with women to promote their rights, have largely been accepted: attention has now moved to putting such principles into practice. Alongside this general acceptance of the principle of addressing the interests and needs of women, mainstream development practice has adopted concepts such as 'participation' and 'empowerment' which are also central to feminist analyses of power and transformatory change. These stress the need to ensure that marginalised groups can gain access to the process of development. However, while celebrating this general interest in the principles of participation and empowerment of communities, we should not lose sight of the fact that women in all social strata and contexts continue to experience poverty and disempowerment differently from men, due to gender-based discrimination.

The role of a specialist gender team

Experience in Oxfam, as in organisations of all kinds throughout the world, indicates that specialist units can be an effective focal point for innovative work on gender equity. While Oxfam has always worked with women, it began its formal engagement with gender issues in 1985, when a specialist unit was set up at head office; subsequently, it adopted and ratified a formal Gender Policy in 1993. A timeline of the 'chronology of gender' in Oxfam as seen from the head office is included at the end of this Introduction; in addition, Oxfam GB's Gender Policy is included as an appendix.

The gender-specialist unit at head office has offered mutual support to over-worked, beleaguered staff both within and outside the unit, acted as a 'task force' to lobby our organisation to take on a commitment to gender issues and put this into action, and has gathered knowledge and experience as a firm foundation for future action. At the same time, a specialist unit can become a ghetto, where individuals are isolated and their work marginalised. In this light, establishing such a unit can be seen as a token gesture on the part of an organisation which tolerates a rhetorical concern for 'women's issues' or 'women's needs', without taking on a real commitment to redressing the marginalisation of women in the organisation and beyond. Discussions in this book of Oxfam's gender-specialist unit is a contribution to this debate. The evolution of the Gender and Development Unit (GADU) to the Gender Team and finally into its present form, the Gender and Learning Team (GALT) has not been a pre-planned, linear trajectory.

Communicating knowledge and experience

Gender and development, as a political project, has always drawn inspiration from a wide range of practical experiences and academic disciplines. However, it is necessary to balance awareness of diverse voices and points of view, with the need to ensure effective communication through a shared language in order to effect political action (Udayagiri 1995). This book is a result of close communication between people from many backgrounds and diverse contexts. This diversity reflects the nature of many organisations like Oxfam, rooted in the history of Northern Europe or America, but which have evolved into organisations which straddle wide parts of the globe. We have included contributions that explore both the strengths and the challenges of this diversity, and the way in which personal identity can create challenges and opportunities for gender equality and empowerment. Varying in nationality and ethnicity, in class and in religion, in age and experience, they understand a commitment to gender equality differently.

While the terminology of gender and development is Northern, the principles are universal; as Chandra Mohanty (1991) has asserted, it is as a result of bias in communications, the media, and publishing that 'Northern feminisms' are known

worldwide and Southern women's independent strategies of resistance to male domination have gone relatively unnoticed. However, our locations are not isolated or static. Engagement with issues of gender equality is informed not only by our own identity and context, but by international thinking and analysis, relationships both locally and across the globe with colleagues and friends, and media including newspapers, books and journals, television, radio, and the Internet.

Ensuring shared understanding of the different experiences in this book was a key issue for us, as editors of this multi-authored book. We recognise that we are ourselves guilty of using words such as 'gender' and 'feminist' imprecisely, and some articles highlight the difficulties presented by this constant slippage in terminology for gender and development work 'on the ground'. A related point is that this book attempts to bridge the 'languages' of theory and practice, and to draw on feminist perspectives as well as those from development studies. The complex interactions and the tensions between knowledge gained from others, and our own experience, as feminists and development workers, is evident in all the articles in this book.

Ourselves and our work

A constant theme in this book is the interconnection between the personal and the professional. Just one example of this is the number of articles included which analyse how women balance productive and reproductive work — both from the authors' own experience, and from that of the women with whom they work. While management theorists are now more widely recognising and appreciating the value of 'male' and 'female' qualities within the workplace, in practice women face both tangible and intangible barriers in their working lives. Who you are, and the responsibilities you carry outside your paid work, definitely do determine how you work and what you can achieve. The linkage between personal and professional is also present in the balance between thought and emotion in some of the articles. In many ways, the writers of this book are telling stories about their own lives, as well as about Oxfam's experience of working on gender. Thus, the articles here can claim only to be versions of events as their writers see it. The truth is that our Gender Policy has been, and continues to be, difficult and challenging to implement. Success and failures, and innovative work and resistance, co-exist.

Another point which resonates from the many contributions to this book is the importance of personal conviction and commitment of staff, including senior management, in ensuring that organisations turn their gender policies into practice. While this needs to be matched by consistent and coherent systems and procedures, it cannot be replaced by them. Personal commitment to the spirit as well as the letter of gender equality is the only means of ensuring that development for gender equity remains a political project.

The process of producing this book

From its inception, *Gender Works* has been seen as both a process and an outcome: the writing of the book has in itself helped Oxfam to take stock of its successes and failures in gender work. The book was conceived as a participatory project, and its outline was shaped by staff from across Oxfam's international programme, who were asked to suggest topics and potential writers, including themselves. Most contributions were instigated at this point, and others commissioned as a result of the debate which started between the editors and other staff members.

Many of the writers have never before recorded their experience in a formal manner, let alone been published; writing in itself has for many been a process of legitimisation of their experiences, and a consolidation of their thinking. Writing for publication is often a means through which commitments are made, both personally and for the organisation itself. In this way, the production of *Gender Works* is a recognition of the work of each writer, a record of their achievements, and a plea to learn the lessons for the future. For some authors, writing was a way of coming to terms with painful experiences.

This book is emphatically not a comprehensive record of Oxfam's work on gender, nor of the many women and men who have worked to make a vision of gender equality a reality within Oxfam and the communities with whom we work. There are many who could not record their stories for a variety of reasons. In particular, the pressures of over-work have been a consistent problem. One author apologised for being late with her final draft, because she had been overseeing emergency work after an earthquake in her region killed 10,000 people. Under such conditions, it is wonderful that this book exists at all. Time for thinking and writing simply is not available to most of the women and men working in development organisations. If we add to this the clash between the demands of our jobs and the other commitments to life beyond the office, it is not surprising that in many cases it had to be contributing to the book that has been squeezed out. We would therefore like to acknowledge the enormous contribution of those women and men who were not able to write for this book.

Conclusion

Gender Works is in no way designed to be the last word on gender issues in Oxfam: as stated earlier, it is clear from the diversity of contributions to this book that the route followed by different advocates for gender equality in Oxfam has been long, sometimes tortuous, and reflects very different ideas on how (and even where!) we should be travelling. There certainly has not been a linear evolution of a single

set of ideas about how 'gender in Oxfam' should look, and how to get there — just as there is not, and never has been, one 'position' on gender equality. This book seeks only to be a modest contribution to a dialogue between ourselves in Oxfam, and other organisations and individuals aiming to change gender power relations, focusing on the work in which we all continue to be engaged. In deciding to publish the book, we recognise the importance of the continuous flow of information, experience, and understanding on gender issues between different organisations and individuals working in many different environments.

As we finish editing this book, we would like to acknowledge that however valuable and necessary it is to focus on our own organisation as we have done, this activity has its limitations. The achievement of gender equality in development is not simply a case of institutional learning and change. This book, and other studies of institutions from a gender perspective, can be a contribution to learning about the need for collective action of committed women and men both within and outside our own institutions, in a mutual effort to achieve development which is equal and just for all members of our communities. But we now need to broaden our gaze, away from a narrow focus on our own institutions and their work, to a wider view of the ways in which organisations must work together in different contexts to address women's continuing marginalisation from economic and political power. This implies recasting the terms of our work on gender to remind ourselves that it is a political project, involving people, commitment and power.

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Timeline

- 1984 The Gender and Development Unit (GADU) is established, with a skeleton staff working on a co-operative basis.
- 1984 The staff network Action for Gender Relations in Asia (AGRA) is established.
- 1986 A strategy to sensitise staff at all levels through gender training is developed.
- 1988–91 National and regional policies are developed.
- 1989 Gender awareness is systematised in job descriptions, grant requests, procedures, and guidelines.
- 1990 GADU initiates a publishing strategy with books, newsletters, reports, guides, and so on.
- 1992 The Women's Linking Project — networking as a development tool — is introduced.
- 1992 GADU becomes the Gender Team, an advisory function, located in the Policy Department.
- 1993 Oxfam UK/I (now Oxfam GB) trustees agree a Gender Policy.
- 1993 The International Division Strategic Aim includes gender analysis as integral to programmes.
- 1994 Women's Linking Conference in Thailand.
- 1994–95 Twenty-three Oxfam country offices take part in preparatory process for the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women.
- 1996 The Gender Team merges with the Programme Development Team to create the Gender and Learning Team (GALT).

