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**III**

# The role of a specialist team

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## Introduction to section III

The articles in this section reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of having a specialised team working on gender concerns in a large development organisation, and on the enormous personal cost of this work. Suzanne Williams records her experience as a member of Oxfam GB's Gender and Development Unit (GADU), and the struggles that were a part of its inception. Tina Wallace, also a member of GADU in the early years, remembers this period, focusing on the team's innovative ways of working and on the message of co-operation and participation both within Oxfam GB, and with groups and agencies external to it.

In addition to telling the story of GADU's birth, Suzanne Williams also looks forward to 1996, when the unit was merged with another, retaining gender-specialist staff but losing much of what had made it unique. She questions whether the transformative vision of the pioneering era was swept away by these structural changes, or whether GADU was always perceived as a unit which was 'born to die' once it had performed its role as a catalyst. Questions remain as to whether the 'mainstreaming' of gender — i.e. the move to make a focus on gender issues mandatory for all staff in all activities — and the loss of a specialist unit in an organisation inevitably reflect a certain loss of commitment to a transformative vision of equality between women and men.

In her article, Alison Farrell looks at her experiences as a young feminist in the specialist gender unit at head office in the mid-1990s, and records the excitement and sense of personal satisfaction, as well as the challenges that this work still holds for the women who are the future of gender work in development. She also raises the issues associated with working as a volunteer, both from an organisational and a personal point of view.

It is commonly accepted that our understanding of gender is closely linked to our identity, and the way in which we locate ourselves personally and politically in our professional context. In the final article in this section, Chris Roche, the first male manager of Oxfam GB's specialist gender unit — now called the Gender and Programme Learning Team — explores the scope that men have for participating in dialogues about feminism and gender and development, in solidarity with women, and their scope for action as professionals in development organisations.

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# Chronicle of a death foretold: The birth and death of Oxfam GB's Gender and Development Unit

*Suzanne Williams*

There never was a death more foretold ...<sup>1</sup>

## **Preamble**

My story is that of the founder of Oxfam GB's Gender and Development Unit (GADU),<sup>2</sup> and I therefore claim some historical authority — but I do not claim the only truth. In writing this article, I feel a little as though I am writing an obituary for a beloved, but estranged, daughter, with whom I have had a long, sometimes close, at other times hostile, relationship; a daughter who I abandoned shortly after giving birth, and who in her teenage years was often glad to keep me out of her life; and one whose days, it seems to me, were always numbered. It is true that in the end we were in a sense reunited, and something of her now continues in a new form; it is still too early to tell what our chances of survival will be. But my aim here is not to be prophetic; it is to look back and to tell the story of an end foreseen, and a death foretold. Doubtless many will disagree with me, but my view is that GADU's fate was sealed from the beginning. She lived on borrowed time, for a number of reasons which I will sketch out in this article.

## **The core and the periphery**

This account is a mixture of unashamedly personal memory, and an attempt to be a little more objective. I see the GADU's life-cycle in the context of a question

about what is perceived as permanent and what is seen as temporary in an organisation, what counts as 'core' and what as peripheral. GADU was set up at a time when Oxfam's Overseas Division, as it was called then, was debating whether to set up a system of 'core' and 'flexible' staff. Core staff would be those long-serving trusted individuals on permanent contracts, who could be moved from one overseas posting to another, building up experience and expertise over time. The rest would be on temporary contracts, called in as necessary. Those of us concerned with gender equity protested that this could be profoundly discriminatory to women, far fewer of whom at that time had longstanding field experience than men, and who, unless they were single, would be far less likely than men to be able to move their families around. For 'core permanent staff', we read 'the chaps'.

I believe that this thinking has never quite gone away — this is what a 'gendered archaeology'<sup>3</sup> of Oxfam might disinter — and the story of GADU can be understood in the light of what is considered to be 'core', and what is flexible, peripheral, and inevitably the first to go when it comes to the crunch. Experiences of Women in Development (WID) or Gender and Development (GAD) machineries in NGOs and government-funded donor agencies, as well as states, show that these tend to have an advisory and catalytic role in both policy and operational functions in the institution. Their success depends upon the extent to which managers take on the agenda, and integrate it into the core functions and ethos of the organisation; but most organisations lack the mechanisms to ensure compliance with their own gender policies. In Oxfam GB, even now, for all the intensive work on gender over the last decade, and the institutional commitment to its Gender Policy, the question of whether gender equity should be a core value for Oxfam has recently been raised.

## Passion and porridge

So, if this the chronicle of a death, you ask: is GADU dead?

Yes, GADU herself is dead. In the mid-1980s, when the women's movement and feminism were struggling against new enemies, GADU represented a vision and a challenge. The 1980s heralded the culture of self-enrichment, the rise of monetarism, and the collapse of socialism. The mid-decade UN Women's Conference in Copenhagen produced evidence of the decline in the status and well-being of women around the world, in spite of policies and strategies to enhance women's development. While gains had been made in relation to employment and remuneration, far more women had become poorer, and the 'feminisation of poverty' was a trend in both the poor and richest countries. The few advances women were making began to be subject to male backlash.

Feminists were demanding a new agenda, not the integration of women into dysfunctional structures and systems. Gita Sen and Caren Grown wrote in 1987:

We want a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country, and from the relationships between countries. We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity, and women's values of nurturance and solidarity will characterise human relationships.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1980s, many of us in Oxfam joined in protests with the women at Greenham Common, supported the miners' strikes, went to rallies and vigils for South Africa, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. And it was the same passionate belief that we brought into the conception and early days of GADU — and, it should be said, into other parts of Oxfam.

But over time, the vision and passion were too hard to sustain. GADU was a women's organisation within a men's organisation, with all the consequent tensions. Dealing with the same resistances and obstacles over and over again was like being force-fed cold porridge. At first, it was unpleasant but manageable, because Oxfam was growing rapidly but had not yet lost its sense of excitement and direction. It was certainly full of contradictions and erratic behaviours, of machismo and discriminatory and patronising attitudes towards women, but there was nonetheless still a strong belief in human development. Oxfam was prepared to share the risks which poor people take every day, and support their organisations over a long period of time, accepting that many hoped-for outcomes could not be guaranteed, and would not be apparent in the short term.

However, during the 1980s and 1990s competition in the marketplace brought pressure to bear on NGOs to demonstrate quantifiable results. While this was part of the professionalisation of NGOs, and indeed essential to define what impact they were having in tackling poverty and injustice, it also spawned shallow or one-sided interpretations of accountability, and an anxious short-termism in relation to development processes. Indicators were *in*, solidarity and commitment to partners were definitely *out*. The need for visible results was seen in the positive explosion of graphics — flow charts, matrices, pie charts, webs, you name it — in NGOs' presentations of their work. But in all of this, some things which were central to the vision of gender equity and the work of GADU began to be discredited and lost. These were the perceptions that social processes are long-term, complicated, and difficult to understand and measure; that they need careful and sensitive scrutiny; that gender and other identities, and social relationships critically determine the course of development interventions; that partnerships must be built on mutual trust, and that this doesn't happen overnight.

## The inquest ...

Perhaps it is as a coroner rather than as an archaeologist that I pose the question whether, during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, GADU and the rest of Oxfam were going in different directions which eventually, inevitably, brought them into head-on collision; or whether there were simply too many accidents along the way.

Looking back now, I'm not sure exactly when GADU died — was it the moment of 'institutional execution', when it was merged with another team, or before then? Was it a slow death, a death by a thousand cuts? Did GADU die when the vision which nurtured her died, as the new corporate culture began to stifle her? Some would say that she had been suffering from a terminal illness for some time and that, in her weakened state, she was an easy target when financial cuts had to be made. They might argue that the illness was partly of her own making; that she was riven by internal conflicts and mismanagement; that in spite of continuing support from many quarters in Oxfam, she had alienated too many of her friends and allies. Others would maintain that she did not die at all, but has instead been brought from her crumbling outpost into the bosom of the family.

The myths abound, and will doubtless alter with each retelling, in the best of oral tradition. In my view, the most cruel myth of all is that gender in Oxfam was mainstreamed to the extent that GADU was no longer needed; that it had done its job, just as had been envisaged; and that merging it with another team was a way of 'mainstreaming' gender more effectively. This myth, like a pale spectre, hung over GADU's head all her life. She was always under pressure to justify her existence, every fault magnified by her detractors. It was a hard life: we know that specialist knowledge on gender will always be needed and that the forces against women's equality with men are not diminishing. Fighting those forces takes energy, time, and resources; as the literature on the adoption of gender concerns by organisations indicates, it is essential to have a well-resourced specialist structure *as well as* individuals throughout the organisation to advance and monitor the process.

But let me go back to the historical record, and lay out the bare bones of my memory, and what I have gleaned from the recollections of others who were there at the time. This is only an account of the beginning and ending of GADU, and an attempt to make sense of it.

## The rest is history

In 1984, after I had been back from my posting as Deputy Country Representative for Oxfam in Brazil for just over two years, I was asked by the then Overseas Director to be the 'focal point' for gender in Oxfam. This was in response to my

having raised the question of women in development and gender inequality while still in Brazil, and expressing the view that Oxfam was lagging terribly behind Brazilian NGOs and feminist organisations working in the development field. Oxfam had a lot of catching up to do. I had written a chapter on women and development for *The Oxfam Field-Director's Handbook*, and Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay was commissioned to write *Silver Shackles*, an account of the oppression of women in India, for the end of the UN Decade for Women in Development, marked by the Nairobi Conference in 1985. It was the first of Oxfam's long list of publications on women and gender.

In the UK, women and women's organisations were mobilising for the Nairobi conference, and we also had to get moving. In Oxfam at the time, the organisational culture made the field office — especially the (usually male) field director — king, and only endorsement by field staff gave legitimacy to any endeavour. Of course, having come into Oxfam through the field, I subscribed wholeheartedly to this article of faith. I knew that the field offices in Latin America, Africa, and Asia had to be behind any initiative on gender at the centre. I wrote up proposals that went to the various field staff meetings, and on the strength of the positive responses from all of them, I formulated the proposal for GADU.

In the meantime, I had been networking in Oxfam House, setting up a steering group on gender to take the work forward. We were concerned that this group include not only staff from the area desks in the Overseas Division, but from key departments in the other divisions — such as Education, Campaigns, and Personnel Division, and the campaigns offices throughout the UK — in order to ensure consistency in policy and practice between our field programme and home operations, including the recruitment, selection, and working conditions of staff. We made strong links with the Oxfam Women's Group, and were active on the nursery committee and the Equal Opportunities Working Group.

But all of us were doing this work during time snatched from our full-time jobs. GADU had no fixed abode, so we had to meet in offices temporarily vacated by absent staff, carrying our boxes of books, journals, and a growing volume of correspondence around with us; we had no budget, so we pinched stationery and borrowed typewriters from our respective departments.

Then, on the strength of the field offices' support, and the clear interest from Oxfam in the UK (especially from the campaigns offices) I proposed the formation of a specialist unit on gender to the new Overseas Director, David Bryer, on his first day in office. David was enthusiastic, having been at the Latin America meeting where the issue had been discussed. It would be a 'ginger group' I remember David saying, and he suggested that it be established on a trial basis for a year, because soon enough, gender would be part of everyone's job, and integrated into all policies and procedures. Later, the period was extended to three years.

So right from the start, GADU was conceived of as a temporary structure, a means to get gender going in Oxfam, get it taken up by all of the organisation, and make itself redundant. The unit's greatest indicator of success would be to have worked itself out of a job.

David wrote his first memo to the Overseas Division, announcing the setting up of the new Gender and Development Unit, and he continued to give it his support. I started out as the Co-ordinator of GADU, working half-time on it, and continuing half-time on the Brazil Desk. I was thus only a part-time mother, of a child who was to have accomplished her life's purpose within three years. I didn't for a moment believe that we would achieve the transformation of Oxfam in those three years, but I had no idea of the depth and breadth of the resistance we would encounter, and which GADU would face all through her life. Nor was I able to predict the changes Oxfam would undergo during the 1980s and early 1990s.

GADU's life was extended; but I still believe that her early death continued to be envisaged, and there were many foretellings of it. Some of the views expressed at the beginning — for example, that to establish a specialist gender unit would create a ghetto, and marginalise an issue which needed to be centralised and integrated — continued to be made to her dying day. These also became self-fulfilling prophecies, when GADU put up barricades and later on failed to build on the growing network of support in other parts of the organisation. But these are not simple cause-and-effect dynamics; while many of GADU's friends in Oxfam tried to 'mainstream' gender in a way which did not imply the extinction of the specialist group, others polarised the issues.

In 1985, GADU was established. We had our own, albeit temporary, office (oh the joy of putting up shelves for our books and papers! — the significance of this is discussed in this volume by Sue Smith), and a full-time and a part-time post. I was the full-time Co-ordinator, appointing an officer to work on the resources. We had help from volunteers from the start. We insisted that GADU should have no hierarchy, and that paid staff would be on the same grade. This persisted for some time, and was a point of principle (see Tina Wallace's contribution). We believed in co-operative and open ways of working, and were trying to set an example within a hierarchical and male-dominated organisation.

The steering group became the GADU committee, which was invaluable in maintaining wide support across the organisation. The committee, composed of women and men, met regularly; its members' responsibilities included working on gender in their departments, whether by commenting on project applications, publications, or promoting training courses. The members were conduits of information in both directions, and at the time essential to our survival in the unit: the GADU committee was the only forum in the Overseas Division which offered staff from different area desks the opportunity to meet on a regular basis

and discuss organisation-wide issues. This was one of the great strengths of GADU in its early days (Tina Wallace's article discusses this in more detail). Had the model been sustained and developed over the years, GADU's story might have had a different outcome, and we might be fully in line with current developments in Oxfam. But this is in the realm of speculation; back to the history.

A joyous reminiscence: an anonymous well-wisher sent us £400 just after GADU was founded. We never discovered who it was, but the committee met in high excitement. We bought the first model of the Amstrad PC with it. If our donor is reading this — the Amstrad saw the unit through many years of work!

We were committed to change within the organisation as well to change in Oxfam's development programme, and by the time I went on maternity leave in mid-1986, GADU had been a key player on the nursery committee, and the Oxfam nursery had been established after much negotiation, and with the support of the Deputy Director of Oxfam. We had good relationships with staff in field offices and the GADU Newssack was beginning to circulate, with information about gender issues in the various parts of Oxfam's international programme; we also had a strange role in commenting on grant applications, as and when the Desk officers chose to send them to us. Mostly, they only sent us projects which targeted women — projects to get women sewing, knitting, or boiling water — of course, gender only concerns women!

I take up the story again from 1996, after a restructuring in the Overseas Division had created the Policy Department, with several 'teams', including GADU, renamed the Gender Team, and the Programme Development Team (PDT) — the other team in the Department which had a brief for direct programme support and for enhancing programme learning to improve the quality of Oxfam's work. When the PDT was created in 1993, GADU had begun to feel that her position was threatened. The discourse of mainstreaming was in the air, turned to suit different purposes. It was mooted that it was time to mainstream gender and really integrate it into the organisation. It was said that GADU had largely achieved its objectives — and indeed, the achievements were substantial. Oxfam had a Gender Policy, a commitment to gender equity was required in most (but not all!) job descriptions, gender objectives featured in strategic plans, and gender was a required variable in project appraisal, monitoring, and evaluation. Oxfam had developed its advocacy work in relation to issues such as debt and human rights, and participated actively in European and international women's fora, notably Eurostep and the Nairobi and Beijing conference processes.

When I first named GADU, a staff member said mockingly that it sounded like a device for sexing baby chickens — gender was not part of Oxfam's vocabulary in the mid-1980s. Now gender is no longer a strange term, although still a frequently misunderstood one (but less likely to be applied to chickens ...).

Surely, with all these successes, some people argued, the time was ripe to merge the two teams with similar mandates to improve programme quality — the Gender Team and the Programme Development Team, in which I was, at the time, Basic Rights Adviser. The merger actually happened while I was on secondment as Country Representative in South Africa; I returned to find that my job title had become Gender and Human Rights Adviser, and that, in the merger, three colleagues had left the Gender Team, one was made redundant, and the contract of the fifth was not renewed. The remaining two staff members were effectively absorbed into the PDT, which became the Gender and Learning Team (GALT).

## The epitaph

Personally, I have come full circle. What we have now is a new configuration, a number of gender specialists within a multi-disciplinary team. We can't be accused of ghettoisation. We have the advantage of a team with wide-ranging skills and experience, and the potential to advance gender work on a broader front. But, from my position now, and remembering the beginnings of GADU, I see that the same challenge and problems remain. Gender work is still catalytic and advisory; peripheral, not core. Gender specialists are still expected to monitor progress in the organisation, and maintain a role in internal policy and external advocacy, as well as to offer direct programme support, through training, impact assessment, planning, and evaluation. The new team has an important function in research and learning. Yet we still, frequently, find ourselves in the sidestream, battling to get gender into the mainstream, rather than determining the course of the stream itself.

There are many versions of why the Gender Team was merged into the PDT; but why not the other way around? There are different levels of explanation. On the level of organisational culture, it was never envisaged to have a permanent specialist group working on gender, and setting its own agenda; I do not doubt that this is because gender equity is still not perceived to be a core value throughout Oxfam; I fear that although Oxfam now has a Gender Policy, there are still considerable obstacles within the organisation to implementing it comprehensively and effectively, and that the organisational culture, while far more aware of gender differences, is still by and large male-defined, particularly in relation to working patterns.

On the level of institutional management, I also do not doubt that the internal divisions and tensions within GADU, by no means exclusive to the unit, were subjected to particular scrutiny and sanction within Oxfam, because the unit worked on gender-related issues and was staffed mainly by feminist women.

Rounaq Jahan, in her study of four institutions (two international donors and two governments) points out a number of shared features of their gender 'machineries'. She also observes that:

... in most organisations, solutions to the structural problems of the machineries were sought in individual personalities: individuals holding WID/GAD positions were either acclaimed or blamed for their personal traits rather than their professional qualities. In the early years of the Decade, agencies recruited feminists from outside to fill WID positions, but later the agencies turned to 'managers', as it was believed that feminists were confrontational and pushed their male colleagues too hard!<sup>5</sup>

We must conclude that if GADU had really been intended to last, as a central and permanent part of the organisation, and if gender had indeed been taken on as a core value in Oxfam, it would not have been disbanded, with the result that fewer gender specialists have been available to Oxfam. It would have been recognised that the organisation could ill afford this loss — too much remained and remains to be done. Other solutions would have been found. But as GADU's death had always been foretold, it was only a matter of fulfilling the prophecy. It now remains to be seen whether the existing capacity on gender in Oxfam will be strengthened or weakened by the latest round of institutional restructuring, and whether Oxfam's commitments to tackling the causes of poverty and distress will be effective for both men and women.

### About the author

Suzanne Williams joined Oxfam in 1977 as Deputy Country Representative for Brazil. In 1985, back in Oxford, she founded the Gender and Development Unit, and was its first Co-ordinator. She was active on the workplace nursery committee, and her daughter benefited from its care. After a journey through Oxfam's Information and Campaigns Departments, she co-authored *The Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief* and *The Oxfam Gender Training Manual*. While Oxfam's Country Representative in South Africa, she initiated strong support for organisations working on violence against women. This remains a key issue in her work in the Policy Department as Gender and Human Rights Adviser.

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# GADU remembered: Some reflections on the early years

*Tina Wallace*

## Introduction

My first day of working for the Gender and Development Unit (GADU) was also my first day of working for Oxfam GB. On the way to work I had a minor car accident. Not serious, but my fault, because I was distracted by thoughts about how it would be in a new job, and by the tears of my small child over a minor incident as I was leaving. I never arrived the first day at all. When I reached work on day two, brimming with apologies, I found there was no desk for me and no clearly designated space for the small gender team — myself, part-time; a full-time temporary staff member; and a volunteer.

It was over a year before the gender unit was given administrative support, yet the job was vast. Originally it included working with the Overseas Division on development work, tackling the needs of both Oxfam staff and partners in over 70 countries; working with Oxfam's UK Divisions on campaigning and fund-raising; and working to change attitudes towards gender and the personal behaviour of Oxfam staff.

During the first month I deleted swathes of my job description, eliminating work in the UK. This had consequences later, because gender issues within the institution proved as important as gender issues in the overseas programme, but just getting to grips with the Overseas Division was a massive task. Working with a large, dispersed staff from diverse cultures, and trying to reach partners as well as staff with only two people in GADU, was a problem exacerbated in the mid-1980s by the difficulty of communications, especially in much of Africa — there were only telexes, not faxes, and phone calls were nightmarish and expensive.

In addition, my job was part-time. I applied because I wanted to combine the work with child-care and other commitments outside Oxfam. However, going home around 5.30pm remained problematic, because the workload was so high and the organisational culture equated commitment with long hours spent at work. It seemed so important to defend both spaces, given my role as a gender officer. Yet for precisely the same reason it seemed harder to do: I felt that I had to impress others in order to interest them in gender issues, and to get gender accepted. Some GADU staff, over the years, felt that this pressure 'to prove ourselves' outweighed the demands of trying to combine caring for a family with working.<sup>6</sup>

Our task was unbounded, the resources limited, and the space inadequate. GADU worked against what, at times, felt like impossible odds to achieve recognition for gender issues, for the role of the unit, for resources, and for the time to bring a gender perspective to Oxfam's work.

Initially, GADU staff experienced much overt verbal hostility from staff in the UK and overseas (the most hurtful, sometimes cruel comments came from European staff, not all male). We could be discussing the provision of wells and the need to look at women's role in water collection, and then be asked, 'Well, my wife looks after our children while you are here lecturing us. What about your children?' Similar comments were made at a summer party: 'Your daughter seems normal enough for a child that is left by its mother.' Very few women with children worked at programme level in the Overseas Division (only five in the mid-1980s), and the vast majority of programme staff had no dependants; the organisational culture was male dominated. Taunts such as 'Is it true you are all dykes in this room?' or 'What are the ladies plotting today?' were sometimes thrown at us as people passed; when we objected, the riposte was 'Can't you take a joke?' Telexes arrived accusing us of interfering with the natural order of life, although very few staff from the countries where Oxfam worked were openly abusive in this way: indeed, they raised many challenging and complex questions for GADU.

I had a second minor car accident after a colleague and I had run a gender training session for new staff. One man had sabotaged the entire session, reducing us to pulp; we had sat like rabbits staring into the headlights of an on-coming car as he whipped up the group into a mode of hostility and non-co-operation. Those organising the induction did not intervene.

Five years later, none of those hurtful, undermining things were openly said or done. There had been a cultural change among donors, partners, and NGOs, and within Oxfam itself. It was no longer acceptable for staff to be openly derogatory about gender issues. By the time GADU was restructured for the first time in 1991, and I moved on, gender training was well established and Oxfam had tried out different kinds of gender training around the world; agreement had been reached to work towards introducing a gender policy to ensure that gender was seen as an

organisational, not a GADU responsibility; gender work had been undertaken in many different field offices and some gender project staff had been recruited; and there were some women in senior management positions. GADU was active in gender networks within the organisation and outside it.

However, silent hostility and resistance to changes proposed by GADU continued and remained difficult to confront; the repeated yet often ignored or rejected demands for essential resources, for representation on key fora, for a voice in the organisation, for inclusion in decision-making, were testimony to that.

Working in GADU for five years was an experience of intense challenge and unhappiness; of enormous potential often unfulfilled. Initially, there was much open hostility from many staff members; later, we wasted a lot of time fighting for survival during constant restructuring. There was a lack of management support at critical times, and continued resistance at all levels to the radical demands that working on gender issues involves. Working in GADU was often very bitter: there was a sense of battling against the odds, of being out of kilter, of being marginal, of being resisted. While some changes in working practices and attitudes were evident within Oxfam, as well as outside, we always saw the potential to achieve so much more within an organisation that espoused equality, justice for the poor, and a voice for the disadvantaged. We were often bewildered in trying to understand where the blocks were coming from: it was easy, at times, to turn the failures in on ourselves, and ask whether we were too confrontational or radical. Did we demand too much? Perhaps if we had been more conciliatory, more compromising, more bland ... we might have achieved more. We were certainly angry about the injustices and pretences we saw on issues of race as well as gender. Yet the agenda was not feminist, and the changes we hoped for were not revolutionary.<sup>7</sup>

In trying to understand and untangle what was won and what was lost during those early years of the gender unit, I will trace the story through the lens of organisational change. There are some key issues which I think have relevance for a wider audience, for those trying to get gender recognised within their organisations as well as in their development and emergency work.

## Organisational change

During the late 1980s, many NGOs in the UK started to undergo major restructuring; many, including Oxfam, brought in external consultants to help them to become more 'professional', more strategic, more competitive. The ideas brought in were largely drawn from business practice, the language was of 'positioning', focus, efficiency, effectiveness, and impact. While continuing to use the language of values and openness, learning and participation, the new

organisational structures were hierarchical, power was increasingly vested in management, and performance was to be assessed by tangible results.

Why does this theme seem, in retrospect, so important to the progress of gender within Oxfam? Many efforts by NGOs to become more 'professional' used business methods which contradicted many of the values and goals they espoused, especially those of learning and promoting gender equity. As the ideologies moved away from 'accompaniment' (working with social movements and in solidarity) towards strategic planning, upward accountability,<sup>8</sup> and impact assessment with its short-term perspective, many realities about working with complex and slow social change became distorted or compressed.

With hindsight it is clear to me that the way in which GADU was set up, and its aspirations, rooted in a non-hierarchical, open, networking vision, were in contradiction to the organisational style subsequently adopted by Oxfam. Yet it was a vision that coincided with those of reflective and learning organisations and may have fitted better with the NGO rhetoric of participation, bottom-up approaches, and the 'new professionalism' espoused by Chambers<sup>9</sup> which are a very far cry from the corporate management structure of Oxfam today.

## The early vision of the Gender and Development Unit

GADU was set up as a non-hierarchical co-operative, reporting directly to the head of the Overseas Division, and supported by an informal committee. The primary focus was on working with staff and partners across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, because major support for the unit's establishment had come from overseas offices, but there were also matters concerning Oxfam's head office, such as equal opportunities and setting up a workplace nursery.

### *A co-operative*

The Gender and Development Unit was set up as a co-operative. The two programme staff were on equal grades and were to share the decision-making and running of the unit. Recruitment, budgets, and supervision of tasks were shared, and both staff had access to the Head of the Overseas Division.

This structure was important to GADU's founders who wanted the unit to break the mould of hierarchical, top-down working. This was a radical vision, drawn largely from work in Latin America, but over time this structure became increasingly contested. Oxfam underwent a series of restructurings, each of which marked an increasing formalisation of the organisation. A hierarchical structure became entrenched, decision-making teams became smaller and slowly grew more distant from the rest of the staff.

GADU lost the fight to remain a co-operative with a restructuring in 1991. There were probably many reasons for this: first, the external consultants, who had fixed ideas on how the organisation should be shaped, demanded it. While many staff agreed with their analysis of the problems, few accepted the proposed solutions, which were drawn less from Oxfam's own experience and understanding than from business management approaches. GADU was forced to become a hierarchy, a change which contained many of the seeds of its future demise.

Second, making a co-operative work effectively is difficult and demanding. Proper management support is needed to sustain this way of working, which was lacking in our case. The pressure and tensions that the staff experienced within Oxfam were played out within the unit and made working co-operatively problematic. These problems were not acknowledged by either management or personnel—instead, the model of working co-operatively itself was blamed.

Third, these internal disagreements raised wider problems for GADU staff, familiar to anyone working on challenging and 'oppositional' issues within organisations: the need to convince the constituency about the validity of the issue requires staff to present a united front to the organisation. In GADU, internal differences were hidden initially, for the sake of 'the cause'. When they were eventually aired and recognised by management, no training or advice was given. Instead, the unit's structure was blamed and the solution was to bring the unit into line with the new, hierarchical, streamlined management.<sup>10</sup> This pattern of ignoring internal difficulties in GADU, which started in the late 1980s, came to its final fruition in 1996 when the unit was merged with another team.

### *Direct access to decision-makers*

The gender unit was established as an advisory unit. We had no management control or authority over staff in the rest of the division, no operational budget, and had to rely on our ability to persuade people to take the issues on board. This handicap was counterbalanced initially because staff reported directly to the head of the division. This was a crucial link, providing access to a senior decision-maker.

In the early days, unit staff were invited to meetings held by the director and senior managers within the Overseas Division, but during the progressive restructurings, this direct access was lost. Management theory demanded that no manager should manage a wide range of people, so the numbers of staff reporting to the Overseas Director were reduced. GADU was subsequently represented at decision-making meetings through its line manager. Over time, this post was held by different people, some of whom fought for unit positions, some of whom did not. The increasing hierarchy and exclusion from access to the centre of power was detrimental to organisational learning about gender, and meant that GADU's voice was mediated through a third party.

### *The GADU committee*

The original GADU committee was of central importance to the unit. It provided real moral and intellectual support; the meetings were an opportunity to air issues, discuss problems, and explore ways forward. It was made up of staff from across the whole organisation who were interested in and supportive of working from a gender perspective; it included men as well as women, those with experience and those without. It was a regular but informal gathering, a grouping of like-minded people supporting GADU staff, and learning alongside them about how to work with gender issues.

When the focus of the unit narrowed to the work of the Overseas Division, the committee members felt, because of their massive workloads, that this should be reflected in its composition. Slowly, and perhaps inevitably, representation on the committee changed from those who were interested and committed to those who attended as formal representatives of their departments. While it continued to be an essential place for discussion, sharing, and sounding out ideas, and many of those who came were supportive and involved in gender issues in their work, the strength of the group was diminished.

Over time, the GADU committee faded altogether, partly because some members who were mandated to come or who had to be represented because of their position in the organisation were not interested, and partly because it was not part of the organogram in the new hierarchical structure of Oxfam. No one had attendance at GADU meetings listed in their job descriptions, and time was no longer available for a semi-informal grouping of people to share and reflect on gender issues. Not all GADU staff saw the role of the committee as positive as the organisation changed; they wanted to become part of the new, more streamlined structure, unfettered by inputs from a range of people outside the unit who were not gender specialists.

But in both its forms the committee was, from my perspective, invaluable. It provided warm company, a place to talk freely; it was a forum for sharing ideas and getting gender issues 'pushed out' into the wider organisation. In 1990s parlance, it was a good tool for 'mainstreaming' gender, for ensuring that at least one person in every department saw gender as relevant to their work. GADU's demise was sorely felt by many and contributed to the sense that gender was in danger of becoming ghettoised as the sole concern of a specialist team; it certainly diminished the cross-divisional learning and sharing around gender issues.

### *Focus on the field work*

While in the original job description GADU was to cover every aspect of Oxfam's work, it was clear from its origins and its location in the Overseas Division that it was set up primarily to promote gender work in development, through working

with staff and partners. That focus certainly dominated the early years of the unit, although much more time than was desirable was spent on internal bureaucratic and management issues in Oxford.

In addition to field visits, and running workshops and gender training around the world, one of the real strengths and innovations during the early years was the creation of the 'GADU Newspank'. The need for staff in different countries to share ideas, to get advice and support from others was so clear right from the start; the in-trays quickly piled up with questions, comments, experiences, and challenges. Staff were grappling with complex problems in widely differing cultural contexts, with few resources or precedents to guide them on how best to address gender relations. Some were learning lessons which were clearly relevant and valuable to others, and so the idea was born of developing a forum where ideas, lessons, and concerns could be shared between staff and partners across the world.

The GADU Newspank was designed as an informal 'publication' through which people could discuss issues of mutual interest. The articles were largely unedited, except for improving clarity, and staff or partners were encouraged to use their own words and idioms for expressing the lessons they wanted to share or the issues they wanted to raise. While working closely in this way with the field staff, the gender unit also ran gender seminars in Oxford, bringing speakers from academia and other NGOs. These talks were also included in the Newspank, sometimes in simplified language to ensure a wide audience, and tape recordings of seminars were sent to field offices.

The Newspank was produced by GADU six times a year and went out to every field office. It was a folder which contained this wide range of articles. The material was non-copyright and could be photocopied, and staff were encouraged to use it in any way they found appropriate and helpful in their work. Over time the volume of material increased and genuine debates started between staff in different offices and countries. The quality of the material included was unique: much of it was first-hand case material, written by people who had never written for publication before. Academics were forced to write in simple terms for this audience and so, slowly, an interesting synthesis of the theory and the practical developed. Out of the early packs came a book, *Changing Perceptions*.<sup>11</sup>

As Oxfam underwent major change as a result of the drive to 'professionalise', it wanted to reinforce and improve its standing as a market leader in the NGO sector. Pressures from within GADU — we felt the need to raise our profile within Oxfam and among other NGOs — as well as external pressures led to the demise of the GADU Newspank; it was replaced by a published journal. While the journal is successful and valid in its own right, the demise of the Newspank saw the end of an exciting experiment which was proving a valuable learning tool for gender issues across many NGOs who had started to request copies of the pack, Oxfam

staff, and their partners. It was easily accessible and open to any kinds of contributions, including cartoons, pictures, and jokes, as well as articles and debates. It was unique within the organisation, and allowed a wide variety of opinions to go out unedited; it had a growing readership and a very diverse range of contributors.

## Conclusions

My experience of working in GADU was a hard one. Looking back, I see that much of my energy and anger were misdirected, and my expectations unrealistically high. In so many ways, GADU was trying to move in a very different direction at the end of the 1980s from the wider organisation, which was increasingly under the influence of the business ideologies of the Thatcher era, by then permeating much of the NGO sector. While some things changed in a positive way, often mirroring changes taking place outside the organisation, many new barriers were erected in the name of 'professionalisation', 'accountability', and 'efficiency'.

While personal attitudes to gender mellowed, and some women started to find their voice within Oxfam and its development work, and although training gathered pace and some practices changed, many barriers to real change — which would have empowered women within the organisation and the development process — were erected. Although gender was officially integrated into Oxfam's thinking and ways of working through the adoption of an organisation-wide Gender Policy, many of the new procedures, ways of working, and demands of the evolving Oxfam were inimical to addressing issues of gender equity.

Oxfam continued to resist addressing concerns with the personal commitments of its staff: for example, beyond the provision of the nursery, issues of child-care did not enter the organisational culture. Women did not manage to penetrate the highest reaches of management during the restructuring; recruitment criteria still seemed to emphasise unbroken work histories, and the ability to work long hours and to travel freely. Within the new management structures, GADU had always been an advisory unit and remained marginal; as the hierarchy was expanded, it was pushed further away from centres of power and decision-making. It lost its voice within the Senior Management Team of the Overseas Division, after years of direct access to the Overseas Director.

Oxfam's growing concern with its public profile in the North, and with its role in advocacy forums in Europe and the USA, switched some of the attention away from the field workers; combined with the restructuring of the organisation into a more rigid hierarchy, this militated against several approaches which were key to promoting gender issues. GADU initially placed much stress on working primarily at field level, on working in a non-hierarchical way, and on working

across the organisation through formal and informal groupings in order to promote learning and sharing between staff and partners actually working in development and emergencies. Restructuring removed many of those avenues. The increasing focus on results, on measurable impact, on visible achievements also hit hard at gender work. Gender relations are complex and embedded within cultures; change is often imperceptible, and may take years to come about. The requirement to document change over short periods undermines the long-term work that is essential for addressing gender inequalities.

Many lessons were learned during those early years about the importance of access to decision-making and the need for proper and consistent management support if gender is to be taken seriously within an organisation; about the necessary but limited role of policy in influencing practice; and about the value of networking. We learned in so many different, often painful, ways that gender is a personal as well as a development issue which is often challenging and threatening to some staff. We realised that working in ways conducive to women's needs and in ways which confront gender inequalities sits uneasily with the move to more hierarchical, business-like structures within the NGO sector. In addition, issues of gender, however packaged, are radical and thus do bring staff into conflict with the wider organisation, and often with the very power structures which promoted an overt commitment to gender in the first place.

The battles are long and hard: it is salutary to remember that during a major restructuring in 1993 Oxfam created five corporate director posts and appointed five men; when the British Government's Department for International Development restructured their top management in 1998, all but one woman were restructured out of the team. We have far to go within development organisations as well as on the ground to redress gender inequalities and ensure that the voices of women are heard. But surely one key role of a non-government agency is to take risks, to be pioneering, to develop structures and processes drawn from its own experience and values, not those of the wider society in which it is placed. It is the memory of the organisation's refusal to take real risks, to stand out against the dominant trends of the time, that still rankles after all these years.

## About the author

Tina Wallace obtained her PhD from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, and taught in Nigeria. Returning to the UK after many years in Africa, she worked first with the World University Service and later with Oxfam, where she helped set up GADU and the Strategic Planning and Evaluation Unit. She currently teaches at the University of Birmingham and carries out consultancies and research with NGOs. Tina Wallace is co-author of *Changing Perceptions* (1991), Oxford: Oxfam.

# Fairytales and feminism: Volunteering in the Gender Team

*Alison Farrell*

The issues explored in this article arise from my personal experience as a volunteer in Oxfam GB's Gender Team from 1993–94. I worked with the Gender Team on its advocacy agenda from early 1994 onwards and was contracted (and paid) from 1995–96. This period was dominated by the preparations for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which I attended.

## A fairy tale

Once upon a time there was a graduate. She had studied hard and gained her degree, and was cast out onto a dirt track which led to a place called 'career'. There, she took in the sights and sounds at the main market place, where big companies competed for graduates with their huge stands, glossy brochures, and big salaries. Having tried to accommodate the needs of these corporations, she said 'no' to this kind of career.

For her, success was not a pin-stripe suit, a house, and a car by the time she was 25 years old. How would she find the satisfaction she was looking for? How could she feel that she was adding, not taking away? How could she find a way of working which reflected her ethos and political convictions? Ah ha! The voluntary sector beckoned. Three months after graduation she found herself in Oxford, working as a volunteer in Oxfam's Gender Team, where a combination of common purpose and activism, cemented together by a feminist ethos, was the order of the day. Furthermore, the international character of the Gender Team gave a sense of belonging to something greater than the shores of the United Kingdom.

This is too rosy a picture, but it is not aimed at disguising hard work and struggle. The main premise of this article is that there are contradictions in the role of, and attitude to, volunteers in an international development organisation such as Oxfam. In taking my own example as a starting point, and looking at the political and social context within which I volunteered, two sets of closely related contradictions emerge. The first is the 'battle' between altruism and self interest, which centres on the question of why people volunteer, and how this is recognised by the organisations they work with. Volunteering is a political project in any context, involving altruism and a commitment to a common vision; but it also brings into stark relief the complexity of the relationships which develop around this political commitment, and the very pragmatic transactions that take place between volunteers and the organisations they work with.

The second aspect of volunteering I will explore in this article is the way in which feminism and a commitment to gender equality interact with volunteerism, in an era when both volunteerism as a political project, and feminism, are considered dead. Looking at the circumstances which would bring someone to Oxfam to volunteer, it does not seem to make sense that a young, feminist graduate would necessarily attach herself to an organisation like Oxfam. It would seem to make more sense that she find a place in a 'women's organisation', and head for segregation. Volunteering as a feminist in a development agency throws up the additional challenge of engaging with an essentially male-dominated world, making the political project of volunteering a feminist one as well. Volunteering as a feminist contributes not only to the vision of social justice, but also to the struggle for fundamental transformation of gender relations within the development process itself.

## **Volunteering as a political act**

Volunteers come in all different shapes, sizes, and colours. Some work in shops, some work in the streets, some work in depots, and some work in offices. Some have money, some don't; some are men, most are women; some do it for years, some for only a few months; some want to gain experience, some have experience to share. It is very difficult to say what a volunteer looks like. Myself? I look like an educated, lower middle-class, white girl, with no 'overseas experience', yet keen to utilise the knowledge and skills gained at university to benefit more people than just myself. I also have the experience of volunteering for over 12 months.

Sometimes my way into Oxfam makes me look like a martyr, and sometimes it makes me look like a conniving schemer. Perhaps the most honest and easiest way of looking at it is to say that I am a pragmatist. Having demonstrated aptitude and

skills as well as showing commitment and dedication, a number of short-term contracts were offered to me and I made the transition from volunteer to paid worker. In this way, volunteering was a way to enter into my chosen career — the commitment shown by volunteering was a necessary step to gain necessary ‘credentials’. But the gap between volunteering and being a paid member of staff is smaller than one would imagine.

In many ways it is often most palatable to assume that volunteerism is a purely altruistic act, where reward and recompense are solely located in the act of giving time freely to a cause or organisation. Yet in giving time, skills, and effort, and in adding value to the work of an organisation, the reward is only partly that you are giving it free of charge; it is also the reward of being part of something political — the feeling of adding rather than taking away. The idea of commitment that is inherent in volunteerism brings up the issue that political conviction and social justice make volunteering more than just ‘something to do’. In this way, volunteering is a political act.

Volunteers who work with Oxfam and its partner organisations undertake a variety of tasks, from running shops throughout the UK, to producing research in the Policy Department, to supporting community health-care programmes in Peru. All these very different, essential and related activities, are entered into with political motivation. Whether or not each individual volunteer perceives their contribution to Oxfam or other organisations as political is, in some ways, irrelevant — they are all committed to a vision of social justice and human well-being and give their time and skills to contribute to this vision. Volunteering is a political undertaking despite the fact that it does not always look or feel like it.

### ‘Oh, which shop do you work in?’

The opportunities for young graduates whose ambition it is to work in a development agency are extremely limited. Development agencies have changed; the view of what constitutes development has changed. The value of motivated Northern individuals, straight from school or university, who volunteer to work abroad for agencies such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and Oxfam, has rightly been questioned. However, many young Northern people who want to enter the development sector are in a catch-22 situation — agencies want experience, yet the opportunities to gain that experience have dwindled.

Alternatives to entering the voluntary sector straight from university tend to require further study. Competition for research posts is high, and researchers must display many of the same qualities as volunteers: namely, a commitment to a particular field of work and readiness to face financial insecurity. As a result,

volunteering is also a route into a working environment. Although the atmosphere and the expectations of volunteers are different, in some ways the pressure of work is greater in a charity than in a profit-oriented company, both for paid and unpaid staff. The personal and political investment necessary for working in the development field is very high. Oxfam relies on that commitment from both paid and unpaid workers. It trades on the idea that each person's work counts at an individual level and is valued at a much wider level.

Research has been carried out on how Oxfam's partners in the South work with volunteers, and particularly on the role of women in the provision of some essential services. However, very little research has been done from the perspective of volunteers on the role of the women and men who help run the network of shops in the UK, nor on that of numerous volunteers who work as campaigners and researchers (both at head office and throughout the UK). In many ways, volunteers do the 'reproductive' work which ensures that non-government organisations can operate effectively: they provide skills, time, and commitment with no monetary benefit (granted, there are schemes to ensure that the volunteer does not incur an economic cost for this). Yet as stated above, the transaction between volunteer and organisation is far more complicated than a straightforward exchange of skills and labour in return for being part of a common cause. It can be a consciously chosen route into a highly competitive career.

However, in a context where the dominant culture defines people's value and status chiefly in terms of how much money they earn, the value of unpaid work in the voluntary sector is simply not understood or recognised, in many cases even by the agencies who are so reliant upon this work. Status in Oxfam and in the development sector as a whole still depends upon attaining certain positions within the organisation, with hierarchy based on grade and salary. These hierarchies are discussed elsewhere in this book,<sup>12</sup> but the important point here is that volunteers do not figure in this hierarchy, and that non-altruistic motives are not recognised in the rewards for volunteers, in terms of attaining some formal status. Patronage and informal relationships still account for volunteers' status. The contribution that volunteers make to organisations within the voluntary sector needs to be acknowledged in more systematic and creative ways.

## **Feminism in selfish times**

Over the past few years, there has been an increasing number of news reports and articles about the political inertia that has beset British, and more broadly European, youth. A report produced by Demos (a think-tank based in the UK) in 1995 states that 'evidence seems to suggest that 18 to 34-year olds are apathetic

and inward-looking: that those at the lower end of the range have not fully accepted the responsibilities of adulthood while those at the higher end of the range have become more selfish.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, as a politically motivated, young, white, middle-class woman I am an oddity. I am a member of a generation of twenty-somethings who can barely remember life before Margaret Thatcher,<sup>14</sup> whose formative years were the boom years of the 1980s, and who left tertiary education heavily in debt to enter an extremely competitive job market. As a whole, the members of this — my — generation are supposed to be out for themselves, as though they had their social conscience removed at birth. We are portrayed in the media as a marauding collection of beer monsters with too much disposable income and a sense of priority which has no basis in reality. If British print and television journalists are to be believed, the Conservative Party's election victory in 1979 marked the death of political activism and the birth of apathy in the UK.

Coupled with this negative portrayal of European youth is the wholesale rejection of feminism in the 1990s. The term is rarely openly used to describe a set of political ideals, as is evident in this common remark: 'I am all for women's equality, but I am not a feminist'. Feminism is also no longer referred to as a political project in the mass media, who instead demonise women who still use the term — this again serves to alienate young women. Sometimes choosing *not* to say that you are a feminist, while following what would appear to be feminist principles, offers flexibility; and in many situations resisting association with one particular doctrine has its benefits. However, there is also the danger of losing a clear idea of what the issues are, and failing to respond to changing environments. If women are told often enough that a feminist agenda has achieved all that it can and that, if you are a Northern European woman, you have achieved equality with men, then there is a danger that much of what we have gained will be lost.

As a concept and a way of organising women, feminism almost fell off the agenda altogether with the so-called backlash against feminism. The backlash, which claims that the women's movement has achieved its goal equality of the sexes and that feminist ideology is now redundant, has been documented by Northern journalists throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It can be seen in the demonising of young single mothers in political and media discourse, in the portrayal of the single woman as a threat (in films such as *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction*), and in accusations that feminism and feminists are the cause of all political and social ills. This alienates many young women from engaging with feminist thinking or with the political project it sets out.<sup>15</sup>

Recent developments in British popular culture show the contradictory portrayal of women's role in British society today. The media have talked about the birth of the 'new lass' — confident young women who know what they want and

how to get it (a pop-feminist model of women's equality). A 'new lass' can behave as badly as men and reject traditional femininity, while retaining her attractiveness to men as a central part of her identity. This image fits hand-in-glove with the media's portrayal of selfish youth and at the same time celebrates the death of feminism. The 'new lass' embodies the ideal of a post-feminist generation.

In the late 1990s, women display an ability to break many taboos which constrained previous generations; and we are rightly indebted to those women who fought for women's rights. But feminists of my generation (yes, they do exist) are caught between two stools. We are faced with a popular media representation of what it means to be a young woman today which, although it challenges gender stereotypes to a certain extent, actually centres on display and attitude. It is all show and little content, and fundamentally continues to reproduce a conventional concept of 'woman'. On the other hand, we are faced with older feminists who were there during the golden age of the protest marches. Some older feminists expect young women to treat them with reverence, and there are unspoken rules of engagement, which tell of deference and a need to be quiet. Young women's legitimacy as feminists is questioned, because we weren't there.<sup>16</sup>

## Volunteering and feminism

If being a young feminist is difficult, working as a young feminist is even more challenging. For me, this challenge took on another dimension because my work takes place within a 'mainstream' development organisation.

The image and location of the Gender Team within Oxfam highlights some of the difficulties of working as a feminist — paid or unpaid — within a mainstream development organisation. The way in which Oxfam has utilised 'gender' and 'feminism' to push forward the development debate and advance the understanding of complex issues of gender relations and gender inequalities for development organisations and government institutions is impressive. However, the challenge of furthering a feminist agenda, and working for social justice in a context where the predominant organisational culture is imbued with male-oriented concepts of development (however radical) is great. The suspicion of the 'otherness' of a gender perspective, among other organisational issues, produces a sense of embattledness which brings a team together in response to external forces, but also increases internal tensions related to having too much invested in a project and too narrow a support base.

There was a great sense of political commitment in the Gender Team. However, my status as a volunteer within the organisation as a whole was restricted because of my personal commitment to feminism. The image of a

'young feminist' is of a woman who is very serious, and politically correct in the extreme. This links in with the media images of the 12-headed monster that is a feminist. An organisation is, in many ways, a reflection of the society in which it operates: I had a sense of informal boundaries within the organisation, and a feeling of being enclosed and barricaded within the Gender Team, missing greater opportunities for transformation and political activity outside, in the wider organisation. The informal barriers between feminist volunteers and the rest of the organisation restrict access to patronage relationships and routes to higher status. The irony is that feminist volunteers find themselves excluded from the organisational hierarchy because of the very political commitment that brought them to Oxfam in the first place.

## Conclusion

Volunteering is much more than just 'something to do'. Volunteering, in whatever capacity, in whatever role, is a political act. Even if a volunteer is maximising the opportunity to gain much-needed experience, by providing time to a development organisation 'freely',<sup>17</sup> the exchange of skills and commitment for experience has a political by-product. Volunteers' contributions add value to the work towards social justice.

Politics and feminism have not died. They have adopted different faces and different voices, and are sometimes not immediately visible. However, if we take our time, and resist the assertions of cultural commentators and media pundits, we can see that people are there fighting for social justice, in its broadest sense. They may not necessarily be linked by a common generation, but they are living in the same world and work within similar contexts.

## About the author

Alison Farrell graduated with a degree in Geography in July 1993. She joined Oxfam's Gender Team as a full-time volunteer in October 1993. From January 1994 her work focused mainly on the Gender Team's advocacy project, preparing for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. She began her first paid contract with the team in January 1995, working full-time on the Beijing conference, which she attended in September 1995. After leaving the team in March 1996, she has now returned to Oxfam and works as one of the Gender and Learning Team's administrators.

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# Middle-aged man seeks gender team

*Chris Roche*

If you don't want to read about the experience of a white middle-class, middle-aged, married man with two children, working on gender issues, skip this article. If you do, at least now you know where I am coming from! I have worked with colleagues engaging with gender issues for the past ten years, and during that time I have questioned and developed my understanding of and conviction about working on gender relations, and about those who promote gender equity.

Probably the most important events which changed my attitudes to gender were living with a polygamous family in a West African village for one year, and becoming a father. Until recently, I have never really deliberately interpreted and built upon these experiences, but now I am recalling them and analysing what shaped my idea of gender roles and relations. As a parent who would like to spend more time with his children, am I at a point of my life when it is in my interest to challenge traditional notions of what it is to be a man? If we can assume that at least some non-poor people are willing to make sacrifices in order to achieve economic and social justice for the poor (such as changing their life-style or paying higher taxes), why should we not assume that some men are willing to let go their privileged position in favour of gender equity? If I am willing to do so, what challenges lie ahead both for me and for the organisation I work in?

## Gender issues and organisations

The relationship between the individual and the organisation is critical. Oxfam GB, like any organisation, is made up of staff with their own identities, interests,

and opinions. Various aspects of these will dominate in various settings—gender, but also class, race, age, disability, and other dimensions of difference. However, many would argue that, at least at the apex of power, the dominant identity of most Northern NGOs such as Oxfam is white, middle class, and ‘male’. This is not, of course, the only imbalance in organisational identity. White, middle-class, ‘female’ interests might dominate over, say, black, working-class, ‘male’ interests.

The first lesson that a man working on gender issues learns is that what he has to say is sometimes discounted. The first brush with such ‘identity politics’ was particularly upsetting because, in other places, my views have hitherto been listened to as a matter of course - even if it was because I was a man. It takes some time to learn what it is like to be excluded or ignored. It takes even longer before you wonder whether what you had to say before had any inherent value, or whether your gender simply made your views seem more coherent and more readily accepted, especially in an organisation that shares your identity.

Next I learned that trying to discuss with colleagues the importance of incorporating a social analysis into their work quickly induces a sort of ‘gender deafness’ and ‘glazed-eye syndrome’. So whatever prior advantages I had as a man, for some the subject matter of my work seems to have made me less interesting, perhaps less coherent, and almost certainly more tedious. Those glazed eyes are not only male, indicating the complex relationship between personal identity and the organisation, often perceived as male-dominated, or having a male identity.

Men’s influence on men should not be underestimated. As we see in public-policy advocacy, ‘insider’ strategies, i.e. using discrete private lobbying rather than public campaigning, are an important part of changing others’ attitudes and behaviour.<sup>18</sup> Men have not yet been trained and used as gender advocates at Oxfam as women have, but this should be part of any transformation strategy. However, men who wish to undertake this role must accept that in the eyes of some, they can never win. If they succeed as gender advocates, this will simply confirm that the institution listens to men rather than women. If they fail, critics will say that they lack true commitment or conviction. Once again, this is a hard, but rewarding, lesson to learn for men who are used to being personally associated with success. It is also a good test of whether you are more concerned with getting good ideas adopted than with personal recognition!

## Debate and dialogue

If we do want more men, and women, to act as advocates for gender equality, ‘gender experts’ must be more prepared to open up debates and to be challenged. Sometimes many men, and some women, in the organisation feel that they

cannot really question or debate issues, because it will be seen as a lack of commitment to 'gender'. Staff in Oxfam mentioned this to me on a number of occasions before I joined — it is interesting that they felt more able to confide this to a man, even a man who works on gender. Equating commitment with the extent to which people do or do not understand notions of gender equality can lead to an uncritical, superficial acceptance of the 'right' views, opinions, and rhetoric. This is dangerous because people who do not fully understand ideas of gender equality are not necessarily resistant to them (although this may well also be the case); the ideas simply have not been adequately discussed, understood, and argued over. These people may therefore be surprised when they delve into feminist literature and discover that a lot of the questions they had, but did not dare ask — about men's role in society, about the relationship between gender and class or ethnicity, about whether there is one feminism or many, about whether the world would be a better or more equal place if it were run by women — are the subject of intense debate and argument.

There is a growing sense in the North that the world is more complex, diverse, and uncertain than we are often led to believe, and that well-known theories which explain the truth of the universe are in fact fallacies. As a consequence, any theory which claims a monopoly of knowledge or offers a single explanation for complex problems is increasingly viewed with suspicion or disbelief. Unfortunately, much of the discourse on gender has followed this trend in order, as Ruth Lister<sup>19</sup> puts it, to challenge male 'universalist' views and to uncloak the 'female non-citizen' beneath. But this necessary challenge to a 'false universalism' has now itself been questioned by those who no longer simply want to oppose 'male' universalism with 'female' universalism. These critics reject the single category 'women' and wish to define other dimensions of identity as equally, or more, important in various contexts.

In a development organisation such as Oxfam, a lack of debate and education on matters of gender equity and social diversity can result in people simply using the 'right' language for planning or evaluating programme work, instead of carrying out the necessary analysis of complex social relations and contextual difference. This has been evident in a number of country strategic plans, and the organisation has accepted such superficial usage of its Gender Policy. I fear that putting right the alleged absence of feminist language in Oxfam (suggested by Ines Smyth in this volume) may simply lead to further acceptance of certain words, but not to a greater insight into how women's status can be improved, and how this aim requires different strategies to be implemented in different places. Moreover, debates must also be grounded in a solid evaluation of case studies, so that the various strategies which are adopted to fulfil Oxfam's Gender Policy can be compared properly.

Open and honest debate at the organisational level should encourage men to gain more than a superficial commitment to gender issues. With a greater intellectual conviction of why and how gender equality can and should happen, men will not merely be encouraged to change their attitudes towards women and towards themselves (which we increasingly understand as necessary), but will build on this knowledge in their own lives. We can make allies among men who will then behave in a gender-sensitive way when 'unsupervised' and act as advocates for change among their colleagues, family, and friends.

### **The importance of communicating new ideas**

Considering the above, it is perhaps all the more surprising that less effort goes into ensuring that the arguments for gender equity and the insights offered by feminist debate are clearly presented and debated, than into gender training (and other aspects of building capacity on gender issues). I am particularly surprised because those arguments seem to me so compelling, and the insights of some feminist analysis so exciting. This may sound like the typical reaction of a man who feels uneasy about exploring his own attitudes and behaviour, which forms an important part of gender training and other capacity-building initiatives. Personal exploration must be buttressed and complemented by intellectual argument, which will reinforce the attitudinal and behavioural change. Ines Smyth's article is partly right in asserting that it is important to open up the organisation to feminist ideas, but I feel that there is sometimes a danger of focusing on the language of feminism rather than the ideas and debates it describes.

Clearly there is a relationship between the words of transformation and the ideas of transformation. Failure to achieve change is often blamed not so much on the language, but on people's inability to understand or accept the ideas and concepts represented, particularly in the case of concepts that challenge the status quo of power relations. In this analysis, the failure to put new ideas into practice is blamed on those people who do not understand them, rather than on those people who communicate them inadequately. Part of adequate communication is being open to challenge and discussion. In Oxfam, some new or rediscovered concepts, such as social capital and civil society, have been subject to intense questioning, and the proponents of these ideas welcomed debate. However, there has been a lack of open discussion of gender theory. It seems that sometimes intellectual curiosity and challenge is acceptable for some things, but not for others.

This raises another question about Oxfam's organisational culture and the distribution of power. To what degree does the organisation encourage or discourage debate on gender issues, compared to other issues? To what extent are

such debates limited to a small group of the converted, rather than addressing a wider audience? And to what extent does Oxfam encourage any debate on development when so much time is spent discussing internal procedures and processes? The changing organisational culture of development NGOs, which some would argue has been one of growing managerialism, leaves little space for thinking about our 'core business'. This imposes severe constraints on potential allies to enter into necessary debates on development, and gender issues in particular.

## Exciting Ideas

So what exciting ideas does feminist thinking and analysis offer a man like me, working in an agency such as Oxfam?

### *Ideas about institutions and organisations*

Naila Kabeer's *Social Relations Approach*<sup>20</sup> and Anne-Marie Goetz's writing on gender and institutions<sup>21</sup> provide particularly rich material for an agency endeavouring to link micro and macro processes of development, and influence the policies and practices of those institutions which perpetuate poverty and inequality. In addition, their work elucidates how organisations are at the same time the product of the society in which they are situated, as well as actors in reproducing that society. This helps us understand how male interests (or any other set of interests) become institutionalised, and how Oxfam must therefore transform itself if it is to maximise its impact on society. Kabeer's work in particular shows how important the household is, as it is at this level that broad social trends actually affect people's daily lives; more generally, the nature of family or household relations is a critical determinant of how societies function.

These are just two examples of the many authors who have contributed to our understanding of organisations and institutions, and whose work would be useful to a wider, non-specialist audience.

### *Ideas about the link between economic and social relations*

The traditional divide between economics and social studies has been challenged by Nancy Folbre and Diane Elson, among others. Folbre's wonderful caricature of a debate between a Marxist economist, a neo-classical economist, and a feminist economist — which not only gives the reader a good insight into basic economic theories but also challenges some fundamental premises of both the 'left' and the 'right' — should be compulsory reading for all Oxfam programme managers.<sup>22</sup> Diane Elson's suggestions on how to ensure a sound integration of gender into macroeconomic analysis should form part of our strategic planning guidelines.<sup>23</sup>

Both authors challenge the established division between economic production, the domain of most economists, and social reproduction (put simply, how societies care for children and other dependants), which has been ignored by conventional economics. Folbre offers intriguing insights into how both of these are shaped by various interrelated interests, which compete and co-operate at different times. These interests exist and are played out at all levels: from the state to the household, and even at the individual level. I am thus an employee, a consumer, a manager, a father, and a middle-class white man all at the same time; different elements of my identity will predominate in different contexts.

Elson emphasises that there are efficiency as well as equity arguments for promoting women's status and empowerment. (In other words, gender equality is not only desirable for moral reasons, but also because it will enable women to contribute to economic development.) Like Folbre, Elson offers some explanation for why, if it is beneficial to society, gender inequality is still allowed to persist. The first, kinder, interpretation is that men do understand that short-term losses will lead to long-term gains. The second one concludes that it is in the interests of the powerful — usually men — to pay the price of lower efficiency in order to retain control.<sup>24</sup>

### *Men and masculinity*

Not surprisingly, I find the recent interest in men and masculinity especially absorbing. A recent issue of *Gender and Development* (GAD) offers challenging ideas and insights which resonate strongly with my own experience. These include the suggestion that there are aspects about the male role which don't actually suit my personal preferences; that women as well as men may have good reasons to preserve the status quo in gender relations; that 'social fatherhood' (in other words, the part played by fathers in their children's social development) is an important role; that male violence, and the links between violence, the socialisation of boys and their livelihood options in particular, need greater study. I also welcome Sarah White's challenge of the caricature of the unhelpful man:

'Good girl/bad boy' stereotypes present women as resourceful and caring mothers, with men as relatively autonomous individualists, putting their own desires for drink and cigarettes before the family's needs. (White 1997, in GAD)<sup>25</sup>

Of course it is quite easy to agree with, and push for, changes that are in my interests and suit my preferences: less time at work equals more time at home with the kids; a better social environment means less worry about my and my family's security; improved government expenditure health and education services, paid for by progressive taxation, means lower potential expense for me; a higher number of women in the army, and there is less chance they might have to call up

unfit 40-year-olds. There is therefore a comprehensive, important agenda for change which would further the interests of both women and men — and this agenda must be elaborated more thoroughly.

It is of course more difficult to accept the cost of realising those aspects of gender equity which challenge my own status or power, where it is not a 'win-win' situation. These range from the relatively simple — would I, and my two male colleagues, be prepared to use the toilet upstairs so that my 17 female colleagues, who now share one toilet, could convert the 'gents' to a 'ladies'? — to harder, usually more personal, questions about roles and responsibilities at home and at work. I also wonder whether I would be prepared to forego a promotion in order that the position would be won by a (gender-sensitive, or feminist) woman. These situations are less clear-cut, and involve considerable sacrifice of power and privilege.

## Putting ideas into practice

Feminist authors provide ideas and perspectives that go to the heart of how societies and organisations function. Their work uncovers how seismic changes in societies, including industrialised societies, can occur without a single macroeconomic indicator picking up on them; how we raise and care for children; how and where men and women's gender interests may complement or compete with each other; and they analyse the complex interaction of economics, politics, and social institutions. However, these ideas and concepts are often cloaked in a form impenetrable to busy field workers and managers. They need translation into simpler language, but they also need to be transposed to people's own lives and experiences. As Becky Buell (quoted in Ines Smyth's contribution) suggests, the challenge is to use these concepts and insights in a way that is relevant to the specific context. The authors who have inspired me cannot answer, on my behalf or that of other men, the more difficult question on how we deal with our own power and privilege; but they can certainly provide food for thought.

Another challenge for development workers is to think more about how the lessons we learn from the women whom we encounter and work with around the world, whose daily struggles we witness, can be better synthesised and shared, and how they might bring about change. Thus we must bring together and link the insights gained from practice as well as from theory.

There is much to be done in interpreting gender concepts both 'up' (i.e. from practitioners) and 'down' (i.e. from theoreticians). Those working on gender issues in Oxfam must communicate in both directions if they are to add value in the process of sharing and generating knowledge. This is a difficult balancing act.

In addition, they must also balance the inflow of others' ideas into the organisation with Oxfam's sharing of its own experiences. It is all too easy either to be sucked into interminable internal processes or to abandon all hope of achieving organisational change and thus to only communicate externally. In our work on gender equality, where the relationship between an organisation and its environment is so critical (as Goetz and others have shown), operating both on the inside and the outside, in a complementary way, is critical.

### Can NGOs achieve gender equity?

In summary, being a man working on issues of gender equity demands a thick skin; the courage to challenge and debate issues until you understand them; to study feminism and engage with feminist debates; and to be prepared to debate and argue with colleagues and friends. It also means working out how your personal interests are translated into organisational interests, and how your personal behaviour interacts with organisational culture. If we accept that most Northern NGOs are white, middle-class, and 'male' in identity, can we really expect these organisations to check their dominant interests in support of those who might undermine them? For an individual such as myself, whose personal identity seems well aligned with the dominant interests, I believe that this is difficult, but not impossible; for an organisation, it must be much harder. Perhaps the first step is to recognise that the organisation's normal practice, its 'default option', is always liable to favour dominant interests, and that the price of transformation is eternal vigilance.

### About the author

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## Notes to section III

- 1 From Gabriel García Marquez (1996), *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Penguin.
- 2 Throughout this article I refer to Oxfam's Gender Unit by its original name, the Gender and Development Unit (GADU). Latterly, when 'teams' became popular in the new corporate deal, it was renamed the Gender Team.
- 3 'The process of understanding the gendered nature of organisations engages researchers in an "archaeological" investigation: it involves disinterring and reinterpreting histories, and scrutinising artifacts such as favoured concepts, terms of inclusion or exclusion, symbols of success or failure.' Anne-Marie Goetz (1997), *Getting Institutions Rights for Women in Development*, London: Zed Books.
- 4 Gita Sen and Caren Grown (1998), *Development, Crisis and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*, London: EarthScan.
- 5 Rounaq Jahan (1995), *The Elusive Agenda: Mainstreaming Women in Development*, London: Zed Books.
- 6 These are issues faced by many women in organisations around the world, where organisational demands fail to recognise let alone accommodate the needs of parents, but especially women in most cultures, to provide care for their children.
- 7 Other agencies were taking on gender issues at the same time and their experiences mirrored some of those in GADU. There is certainly a story to tell and research to be done comparing the different approaches. Did agencies that took a more conciliatory approach and saw gender as a technical issue and a way of improving project performance, rather than an issue of women's rise and gender equity, achieve more than GADU? What was lost by 'hiding' gender under broader issues of social development and what was lost by trying to get an organisation to accept that working from a gender perspective was more than making projects 'women friendly'?
- 8 The stakeholder rhetoric suggests that NGOs become accountable to people at all levels, but in practice lines of accountability have been drawn tighter and tighter to Trustees, donors and senior management, not to the people at community level.

- 9 Robert Chambers calls for a 'new professionalism' which involves humility, recognising the limits of outside experts, which listens and learns from people on the ground. This is the antithesis of hierarchical corporate management structures which are based on a 'professionalism' drawn not from NGO experiences but from the business sector.
- 10 It is my perception as an outsider that it was this same problem of being unwilling to resolve difficult issues within the unit that led to the managers closing GADU finally. This is of course highly contested within Oxfam.
- 11 Reference to Wallace, T. and March, C. (eds.) (1991), *Changing Perceptions*, Oxford: Oxfam.
- 12 See Wendy Carson's article in this volume.
- 13 Demos (1995), 'Freedom's Children', quoted in *The Guardian*, 'The Victory of Me over We', 28 February 1998.
- 14 British Prime Minister from 1979–90.
- 15 See among others, Faludi, S. (1992), *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, London: Vintage.
- 16 Wurtzel, E., 'Get A Life, Girls', in *The Guardian*, 10 August 1998.
- 17 That is to say with minimum economic cost to an organisation.
- 18 Iain Gray (1998), 'Trends in Advocacy', paper prepared for the Oxfam fundamental review.
- 19 Ruth Lister (1997), *Citizenship: feminist perspectives*, London: Macmillan.
- 20 Naila Kabeer (1994), *Reversed Realities*, London: Verso.
- 21 Anne-Marie Goetz, 'Institutionalising women's interests and gender-sensitive accountability', *Development Bulletin*, Vol. 26, No. 3.
- 22 Nancy Folbre (1994), *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraints*, London: Routledge.
- 23 Diane Elson (1995), *Male Bias in the Development Process*, Manchester University Press.
- 24 Diane Elson (1997), *Gender-aware country economic reports: Concepts and sources*, Working Paper No. 1, Manchester University Press.
- 25 *Gender and Development*, Vol. 5, No.2, 1997.



