8 Please genderise my log frame

Interactions with technical specialists for gender mainstreaming in environment projects

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In conversation with Annette Wallgren
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International feminist activism and research has had significant success in pushing gender issues onto the international agenda and into global governance institutions and processes, including in those deemed to be science-, technical- or environment-related institutions. The goal of gender equality is now widely accepted and codified in international normative instruments, such as those propelled and promoted by the United Nations, through the instrument of gender mainstreaming. Additionally, the donor and development community has championed gender mainstreaming in far-reaching ways, such that even environmental organisations are now tasked to implement it.

Since the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio Janeiro in 1992, international environment agreements – some more than others – have contained legally binding clauses and specific guidelines promoting gender-responsive sustainable development in biodiversity, desertification, and natural resource management. Following UNCED, the Fourth UN World Conference of Women held in Beijing in 1995, governments worldwide endorsed the landmark Beijing Platform for Action, where Section K is entirely dedicated to women and environment linkages that will guide future gender mainstreaming policy and action. Governments and civil society actors participating in Beijing endorsed the strategy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all public policies in order to counter the gender bias in society and policies and to produce gender-equal policies.

The linkages made between women, gender and environment in these agreements were largely influenced and framed by proponents of Women, Environment and Development (WED) and a Global South variant of ecofeminist thinking. These gender and environmental analytical frameworks fundamentally recognise and track the dichotomous differences of environmental impacts and responses by women and men, arguing that women are hardest hit by environmental stresses and therefore are more favourable environmental agents (Resurrección, 2013, 2017; Elmhirst & Resurrección, 2012). This, henceforth, became the persistent gender mainstreaming rationality that travelled across environmental programs and policies until the present time. These frameworks landed on favourable

scientific ground owing much to their propensity to focus on measurable impacts from environmental degradation, with less attention to the political economic and discursive origins of where these impacts might be anchored and possibly challenged (MacGregor, 2010; Tschakert, 2012)

In similar vein, much of the growing literature on gender mainstreaming has highlighted and warned of the ways with which it has watered down, technocratised, effectively blunting the political edge of transforming gender and power relations (Prügl, 2015; Parpart, 2014; Davids et al., 2014; van Eerdewijk & Davids, 2014; Tiessen, 2007; Mukhopadhyay, 2004; Miller & Razavi, 1998; Baden & Goetz, 1997). How then do we approach existing gender mainstreaming efforts particularly in environmental organisations by gender professionals? In this chapter, we venture a different track by reflecting on the relationships – often cautious and uneasy – that are typically forged in large part due to the efforts of gender professionals who for better or worse occupy the divides between technical science and social change imperatives. We then explore and reflect on how ‘feminist strategizing develops its own rationality: (often) to govern through subtle and indirect means’ (Çağlar et al., 2013: 5; parenthesis included) in an environment and development organisation.

The reflections of gender experts Annette Wallgren and Victor Tsang of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) tell us of the myriad ways of navigating a conventionally technical and biophysical knowledge and policy terrain as representatives of gender mainstreaming. By doing so, they unravel how gender and environment regimes are often co-constituted by the social practices of the gender experts and technical specialists who co-inhabit, discipline and define the logics of this terrain. From their accounts, but without essentialising the ways in which their own positionalities play out, we are also able to explore the different ways each of them is navigating the terrain.

Becoming gender experts

Twenty years ago, Miller and Razavi (1998), in their book, *Missionaries and Mandarins: Feminist Engagement with Development Institutions*, told us that feminist incursions have been greater in institutions or parts of them that are generally amenable to gender and social justice concerns. The International Labour Organization, for instance, is one of them. Institutions where economic efficiency and growth are the chief concerns such as in the World Bank, the landscape was free from feminist incursions. However, not even a cursory mention about feminist engagements with scientific and technical organisations was present in Miller and Razavi’s book, as these were probably deemed too remote from the radar of feminist activity. Things have significantly changed since then.

The first full-time gender experts in UNEP were appointed in 2007. Since then junior and mid-level positions have been created for gender experts across its offices worldwide. Victor Tsang is stationed in the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, while Annette Wallgren is based in the Asia Pacific regional office in Bangkok.

Victor: UN Environment Programme works on a variety of issues to protect our shared planet, from the promotion of renewable energies, minimising the harmful effects of chemicals to protecting species in forests and oceans. We are unique as an UN organisation as our headquarters is located in Kenya, a lower-middle-income country. In practice, UNEP carries out assessments, convenes experts in workshops, organises trainings for governments, sets standards, builds alliances across sectors and sometimes engages community members in demonstration practices. It works primarily at the normative level. Many of our colleagues are scientists, bureaucrats, engineers and economists. There are also political scientists, social scientists, journalists and people in support functions such as finance and administration. There are more men than women in professional positions, especially at higher grades. Colleagues in general maintain a positively friendly and healthy relationship, keeping professional distance. There was a time when we could not imagine full-time gender professionals in UNEP, and it seems the enthusiasm for gender mainstreaming is growing.

Annette: We have women in our top management positions and I think that is generally well accepted. It is a friendly and open environment, it is easy to consult with colleagues. Gender has become more recognised as a core business.

Babette: Why do you think gender issues have found their way into UNEP? Was it because of the momentum caused by Agenda 21, which was the outcome of the agreements made in Rio de Janeiro in 1992?

Victor: At that time of the Rio Conference in 1992, the concept of sustainable development very much focused on environment, which is quite different from how it is generally understood today. The economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development have become more integrated, as there's in fact a push for people to begin to see the link among these things. I guess, in the past, people tended to see that gender is more important for development but maybe less for the environment. So, I guess we need to present the links between gender and environment in a different way for an environment-focused audience. For example, we can say that changing environments have different impacts on women and men, so we need to ensure that both are involved in decision-making regarding the management of resources.

Annette: Just by talking to colleagues and hearing them say things like, 'Everything is about gender now [laughter]', makes me think that maybe it's a sign that gender is now gaining more importance. Because they have been in this business and worked in UNEP for 20 years.

Becky: Given the heightened recognition of gender issues in environmental policy contexts, what do you understand by the term 'gender expert'?

Victor: It means someone advancing the cause of gender equality as fully or partially her/his profession, with formal terms of reference. The concept should be differentiated from 'women professionals', or people who promote gender equality on a voluntary/informal basis, or 'gender champions', or people working in a women's organisation.

Annette: I also see it as a very technical expertise, which it is not always valued as such, as Victor is saying – sometimes more as an advocacy role.

Babette: What was your disciplinary background, and did this help you attain the status of a gender expert? Sometimes we are hired not by our educational background but by our work background.

Victor: I had a master's degree in Education, Gender and International Development from University College London, and had recently completed two study modules with the School of Oriental and African Studies on sustainable development and climate change. My degree in gender has been instrumental, especially in the earlier stage of my career when I was with the World Food Programme (WFP). The confidence and learning capacity acquired from the degree helped me pilot outcome-level gender indicators for WFP. During 2013–14, I was able to develop, pilot-test and get approved WFP's first ever corporate gender outcome-level indicator. I grew up in Hong Kong, a traditional society where there were set roles for girls and boys. I worked in an NGO in the rural villages and communities in northwest China – villages, communities. When conducting a survey in a rural area, I was knocking on someone's house and asked whether there was anybody home, and a woman came out and said 'no.' I was first curious and later became puzzled, why a woman would think of herself as no one, and that was how I started my interest in gender.

Annette: I did my studies in International Crisis and Conflict Management, and later a Master's in International Politics, specialisation Peace and Conflict and all my independent research and assignments focused specifically on gender roles. For example, I did research in Ethiopia on gender roles in times of crisis, where I learnt how the Eritrean refugee men in Ethiopia suffered a loss of masculinity after losing their ability to provide support to their families. Ever since, the notion of men's as well as women's perspectives have been central in my work. I also did research in Kosovo looking at women returning after the war to rebuild – as political actors – the country after the conflict. I also did gender studies in Canada. My consciousness for gender comes from the activist side of me in my younger years, realising early on in life that there are inequalities – expectations foisted on boys and girls – but also realising that these structures can be changed.

Babette: You both seem very qualified for the profession, with great background experiences. How do your present colleagues respond or react to your professional role within the organisation?

Annette: (Laughter) It's almost expected from me because I'm from Sweden. However, I often come across comments like 'There are no linkages to gender in this project', often due to lack of capacity and understanding. Then it is important to support colleagues in unpacking the issues and identify the linkages between gender and the particular environmental problem that the project is addressing. This is the first time our regional office has a full-time gender professional so within these initial years I had to find my role, establish a portfolio and make a case for the need for gender inclusive programs.

The fact that this position is more junior also has an impact, and if I'm cynical, I'd say perhaps I'm not as influential. However, starting from scratch, we have now established a five-year project on gender equality and climate change, gender responsive biodiversity planning projects in two countries and work areas of climate change law, chemicals and waste, forestry, fisheries and resource efficiency that include gender in a more systematic and responsive manner. As a result of this portfolio, my role as a gender professional has become clearer within the office and my voice and authority have emerged.

Victor: I usually present myself as working on the 'people' side of the environment. My male colleagues talk to me how they really feel about including gender in their work. The chance is also bigger for men to open up to me. It happens that they will confess to me their 'politically incorrect' thoughts, such as their disagreement with the UN's gender parity policies. I position myself as a social scientist, a gender specialist, and a friendly colleague and sometimes as a friend, so that I have the legitimacy to provide technical and institutional gender support in a positive atmosphere.

Apart from the earlier international environment and development agreements that have carried gender-inclusive languages, over the course of recent decades, gender equality has evolved into an institutional imperative even in technical organisations (see Introduction). Gender mainstreaming has become the central political strategy of environment and development organisations to address gender inequality: thus, in a sense, gender mainstreaming has now become 'top down' and has acquired its own rationality from discourses and social processes within which these organisations are embedded.

Gender experts, more than ever before, are populating the ranks of professional bureaucrats in multilateral international environment organisations and have skilfully stepped in pace with the architecture of growing information systems, technologies and tools for assessments, data capturing, visualisation, modelling and measuring. The UN is particularly tasked with creating norms for gender equality among national governments for their policy making, and along these lines, UNEP purports to mainstream gender in its programs, networks and engagement operations.

Gender professionals within the UN bureaucratic machine often struggle with patriarchal norms and practices (Sandler and Rao, 2012; Caglar, et al., 2013; Miller & Razavi, 1998). Joanne Sandler and Aruna Rao (2012), for example recall the sexist and misogynistic remarks that were used to belittle the efforts of men involved in gender mainstreaming activities in UN organisations. On the other hand, Miller and Razavi (1998) point out that gender experts are the 'feminist policy entrepreneurs' who draw attention to the innovative nature of their work, identify new issues, skilfully mobilise facts which can justify action and cultivate internal allies and champions. Fellow bureaucrats also become allies with gender experts based on multiple deflections of identity – gender, nationality and race – as Annette and Victor hint at, cultivating webs of relations that can push the gender agenda forward in potentially productive ways. The next

sections will show how gender mainstreaming in UN organisations can create conducive spaces for dialogues albeit tainted by instrumentalist manoeuvrings and ‘acting pragmatically to secure small instrumental changes’ (Eyben, 2010). Some quarters remain intransigent to change, while others signpost a ‘slow revolution’ (Davids et al., 2014).

The challenges – and golden moments – of gender mainstreaming

Babette: I’m sure you’ve devised strategies on gender mainstreaming. They can be very unique.

Victor: As a mechanism for accountability for gender mainstreaming, I introduced the Gender Marker system to UNEP in 2015, and I reviewed all new projects according to the Marker’s four criteria. Through the compulsory project review mechanism, I am able to provide comments and suggestions for improvement. In rare cases when the projects are gender-blind, I confront the project managers, being firm but still trying to help in a friendly way. For the gender marker, we use a four-point scale. A score of 0 means gender was not applied at all. A score of 1 and 2a indicates that there was some application. And then sometimes they score 2b, which means that the project is a gender-targeted initiative. So usually, we have this four-point scale, but the criteria will probably not be the same for a different organisation, I think.

Annette: My starting point is always the gender analysis, which will guide the project. This is where colleagues and I start unpacking the environmental problem to identify the gender related areas, situation for men and women, who is impacted, who should be part of the solution, where (data, existing policies, publications, research) and with whom can we find the information we need (who to consult: women’s groups and NGOs, men and women in the communities, women’s ministries, etc.) This gender analysis is often missing, which means that it becomes difficult to include gender in implementation and measuring impacts. Some projects I have seen move directly to sprinkle some gender activities in project implementation without a sufficient gender analysis, which is a big issue. The risk is that we implement activities based on assumptions and without understanding the specific context and the gender roles; secondly, it may not make sense to those in the project team who are responsible to implement the activities – leading to further resistance of gender mainstreaming.

Babette: Is gender work or mainstreaming almost like a skilled service? Sometimes it feels like we’re handmaidens of mainstreaming (laughter). You know, as service providers.

Annette: It’s been an interesting process since I started. Since it was a new position, no one had been a gender officer before in the office. It was a bit daunting to try it out. What’s going to be my role? I needed to sort of justify (laughter) or build up the profession itself. So, in the beginning, it was a lot of this advisory work in all areas. This advisory role has not stopped but it

might have decreased a little bit because colleagues have actually started to pick up on gender, so I don't need to always be involved. And there is a larger number of gender champions and they take initiatives themselves. I think I'm going to steal a quote from one of our partners that was said over dinner this week. But Victor might help me to say exactly what she said. She said something like, 'Can you genderise my log frame?'

Victor: Yes, exactly: 'genderise my logframe'. And sometimes, you receive an email where someone is asking, 'Can you please add some activities here and sprinkle some gender gold dust over this project document?'

Annette: But what is interesting then is that I don't mind having people asking me and seeking advice. I think that it's also what I really enjoy. But through this other work of an established gender project portfolio, I think I've gained a bit of more...

Victor (suddenly stepping in): Respect.

Annette: Yes. So, I don't feel that it's the same as when I started. They don't see my job position as a supporting role only anymore. It's more a professional, technical expertise.

Becky: Since we're now talking about change, in your experience what were those breakthrough moments, and what led to them? Even if you say that it's on the mainstreaming front, what made them golden, and why do they indicate some kind of breakthrough?

Annette: I guess the breakthrough happens when colleagues themselves conclude how and why it makes sense. I don't have a gender marker, or I don't have that much of a stick to use (unlike Victor), so what I sometimes invoke is the donors' preference to integrate gender issues, or the time dedicated for gender concerns as allocated by funds, or whatever requires gender to be included. But I think the best approach in my work is to use the softer (laughter) approach which means that, okay, we sit down, and we talk, and this colleague says, 'oh it doesn't really make sense here and I think it's a bit too much and it's not relevant, my work doesn't really relate to gender.' So, then we just start to discuss, and I say, let's not make this so complicated, it shouldn't be so hard and let's make it work for you in this area and we don't need to go over the whole theory. Because also sometimes they say, I've done this training and I don't understand, and it doesn't make sense what they're talking about and how their ideas relate with my work. And then that's when I start asking questions like, 'so how does your project relate with people? Does it relate with people in any way? And the golden moment is when I don't have to preach, I don't have to teach, it comes after a while through reflection from their side. And since they are the experts on their work, I am not, when it makes sense to them and why it should be included, in what way it can be included that's not too complicated, that's really nice (laughter). That's really the breakthrough moment. I'm not a lecturer or I don't prescribe to them how they should do it, it's really about getting them to understand for themselves why gender is important. And this is a strategy that works for me, I think.

Victor: Also, we shouldn't be judgmental. When people make some jokes, even if they're wrong, we don't react immediately. If people feel that they're being judged, they will switch off and then we lose the opportunity to continue the relationship with them. The approach should be friendly and positive, keeping things simple, and enabling people to feel ownership over their work.

Facing resistance and fear

Becky: Do you often face resistance since you work in a highly technical environment?

Victor: From time to time, there is resistance, since no one wants to do additional work. Gender mainstreaming is still considered additional. Despite their good intentions, they often really don't know what to do, then that's when they find it demanding. Sometimes they react and ask why we don't focus instead on disability, as they are not convinced that gender is the most important consideration. They see it as something political.

Annette: The task of gender mainstreaming also comes from management direction, from a higher level, through our different screening systems, so it's not just coming from me, but it's broader. This is perhaps why people don't complain regularly, although there is some resistance as Victor says. This results in people wanting me to do the job, and in the beginning I did that so that I took on a lot of extra work such as adding gender dimensions to documents and project designs. I had to delegate it back but provide support.

Victor: A colleague who's very knowledgeable and has long worked on biodiversity ecosystems said a few times that she really enjoys working with you Annette, as you make it understandable for her. She also explained that, 'In my previous work, the gender people I met have been sometimes making things very complicated.'

Annette: The same person also seemed to hint that some gender professionals she's known have been quite confrontational and pushy and she thinks that Victor and I are quite nice and want to make it easy for people. And that we don't want to complicate it too much and overwhelm them. But there's a balance to not reduce the importance of gender. This is something I sometimes struggle with. I want it to be convenient for my colleagues, but I also want to make them understand that this it actually does need some work. It does need some effort. It doesn't come easy, and it's not a quick fix.

Babette: Do you do a lot of persuading?

Annette: When I meet them one on one they share their lack of knowledge of and how to integrate gender issues in their work. People don't like being exposed and are afraid of it. For instance, when we discuss climate change adaptation, we try to unpack the roles of women and men as they adapt. I ask them questions – what do men and women do? Are their livelihoods impacted due to climate change? What similar and different constraints to they face? I try to make gender concrete and understandable and create a relationship of trust.

Resistance to gender mainstreaming and gender training has been studied closely by Lombardo and Mergaert (2013). They cite several reasons for people's resistance. For instance, they point out that gender mainstreaming efforts challenge people's personal identity and personal beliefs, sometimes making them feel exposed to criticism or suggesting transforming practices that they had thought were conventional. Questioning the personal sphere can also trigger fear and self-protection that can cause resistance in people. Another reason for resistance may be that people consider gender equality and feminist goals to be ideological and emotional, rather than rational, scientific or legal. They also resist when they feel that trainers are trying to change their attitudes or manipulate them in some way. Others may also deny that there is need for change in the existing order of things, referring to the 'natural or innate' order of things otherwise, advocating that gender inequality is not a problem in some societies.

Annette and Victor's accounts instruct us slightly otherwise. The institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming in the UN as a liberal institution appears to be increasingly deeply entrenched, and as Victor narrates, mechanisms are in place to hold people accountable to meet gender-equal goals. In turn, it appears that people may be resisting what they perceive to be 'ideological' or 'political' additions that seem incompatible with their technical workloads. However, to openly resist or plead ignorance on gender concerns may render some of them deeply vulnerable and epistemologically not in step with a UN core value and required skills portfolio. This, however, does not suggest that patriarchal attitudes and practices are completely on the wane. Lombardo and Mergaert (2013) also observed that resistance takes many forms: such as despite strong language supporting gender equality and mainstreaming, resources are in reality scarce to make it happen, thus often times a case of everywhere, but nowhere (Tiessen, 2007).

Epistemological questions

Becky: What about integrating gender with technical environmental topics – has this been challenging as well?

Annette: I can also have a hard time making the connections between gender and environment. For example, my colleagues have an air pollution project and I found a few entry points that's for me very clear. But there's still some parts that I find can be a long shot. I do wonder, 'Does it make sense?' I have been talking to a colleague who's working on a partnership for clean air in Asia and what they're doing is having a number of member states monitor the level of pollution in the air. Which is a fantastic and important initiative for the environment and to see where the worst pollution is. So, they have a good network and are meeting regularly. And he is really keen on gender issues and would like to include that into his work. And I, of course, every time I hear this, get very excited. But to me, then, when I started to look into this project, which is not about people, but very much about data and monitoring, it seems to be a bit of a long shot. How do we include gender into air quality monitoring project?

And I think that this is why we try to draw the links between gender and environment, because if we do, then the outcome will be ‘something else’. For example, I mean we can think of how environment interacts with people, or the human use of natural resources. It can become ‘something else,’ and not just pure monitoring of air quality. We could turn this into a gender awareness project included in there.

Victor: And also they tend to be very practical, they want something quick and easy. They are busy and people who are from a science background do not learn by reading word by word. They learn by having numbers and formulas and shapes and graphs.

We change as we work for change

Becky: *Isn't there a growing need to demonstrate positive impacts from your gender and environment work?*

Babette: Indeed, the funding environment nowadays emphasises that programs yield positive results on empowerment and gender equality.

Victor: We work a lot on internal capacity, standards and processes – all central to gender mainstreaming – but we hardly have any clues what impacts they lead to, and we hardly have opportunities to work in the frontline, especially in my case as I am based in the headquarters.

Annette: I have been thinking about this a lot, since some of my previous work experiences focused more directly on women's empowerment and gender equality. UNEP's goal is rarely to achieve gender equality in itself. Rather, we are making sure that we are equally involving everyone's perspective, needs, contribution, capacities. The mantra I keep sharing with my office is that gender inclusive programs creates better solutions and more sustainable environmental protection.

I think I've done a bit of a professional shift, since I started in feminist organisations where the end goal was gender equality and women's empowerment. So then moving to working in an environmental organisation, I really had to adjust. I realised that I have had to change a bit myself. Colleagues who are experts on biodiversity and climate change have taught me so much of how the process works for governments. They have made me realise that for gender work to be successful in this area, we need to understand where the governments are coming from, and their processes. So we cannot come and push gender equality too far, because then we will lose their attention, and we will lose the efforts we've put in building a relationship with them. So I feel that I have learned to work towards more realistic results.

As our work and engagements change so do our identities. ‘Feminism’ and ‘feminist politics’ in international organisations are also in flux and changing as institutional contexts change. They are fundamentally shaped and constituted by the very nature of our engagements, our evolving knowledge, the institutions that we are part of, and gender inequalities in wider society. While our ethical commitment to equality and empowerment drive us to make career choices as

‘missionaries’, we are also defined by the institutional and contextual boundaries within which we enact our commitment. ‘Institutionalised and power-laden environmental management regimes have led to the emergence of new kinds of people, with their own emerging self-definitions, understandings of the world, ideologies and behaviours’ (Robbins, 2012: 216).

This chapter ends by underscoring the contested nature of gender mainstreaming as revealed by the experiences of Annette and Victor, and by the gender mainstreaming literature in general. Gender mainstreaming processes incorporate the complexities and necessities of forging relationships and alliances. In technical organisations, we observe a recourse to ‘rendering gender technical’, to paraphrase a line from the work of Tania Li (2007): in order to dexterously fit the feminist agenda within bureaucracies that are immersed intractably in their own procedural inertia and cognitive mindsets, gender professionals have to skilfully simplify the otherwise complex understandings of gender and power. In the end, gender mainstreaming regimes turn out to be disciplined sites with logics derived from gender professionals’ creative ‘genderising’: or ‘bending and stretching’ that are necessary to embed gender equality agendas in existing bureaucratic contexts (Verloo et al., 2009)

The mandate of multilateral technical organisations like UNEP is to inform and influence states on environmental protection. To do this, they produce knowledge products that are envisaged to potentially inform policy decision making. Annette pointed out that air quality monitoring, for example, stood on its own and linking it with gender and social issues is challenging, and perhaps even pointless. But by otherwise alluding to evolving ‘something different’, Annette hopes that they will produce information that is no longer free-floating balloons in a vast sky of knowledge, but that one day it will make sense to link them with actual people’s gender-unequal lives.

Annette and Victor use deep engagement with their technical colleagues, which requires reflection and dialogue, tracing where and how knowledges can meet. These are some of the many travails of gender mainstreaming in an environment organisation. As Eyben and Turquet (2013) express eloquently in the blurb of their book: ‘Every day, in international development organisations feminist bureaucrats make use of strategy, tactics, wisdom and skill to act for their principles. Most of their strategies are invisible and their tactics subtle. They draw on networks of friendships and relationships that create ripples of effect in enabling their organisations to be pathways of women’s empowerment.’

Victor Tsang was a Program Officer of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). He was a passenger on the Ethiopian Airlines flight to Nairobi which crashed on the morning of 10 March 2019 near Addis Ababa. There were no survivors.

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