Flagships and tumbleweed:

A history of the politics of gender justice work in Oxfam GB 1986-2015

Emma Crewe, SOAS University of London

Abstract

This article contributes to scholarship on the political nature of feminists' work in international development NGOs. The case study of Oxfam GB is contemporary history, based on compiling a brief history of gender justice work between 1986-2014 and eighteen months of part-time participant-observation fieldwork during 2014-15. I describe funding pressures and imperatives, contestations of meaning, and power struggles within Oxfam GB and argue that gender justice becomes entangled in both internal and the external politics of international development. This is part of a wider research programme about how ideas about gender equality norms travel between and around development organisations, so I finally draw conclusions about how norms are contested and embodied. The shapeshifting political nature of feminist work challenges prevailing theories about how norms and ideas travel and take hold within organisations.

Introduction

Oxfam GB positioned itself as a world leader in gender justice at the end of the 1990s. Its current aim is to achieve both the fulfilment of women's rights and to mainstream gender justice throughout all its work. And yet the commitment to, and even meaning of, gender equality remains uneven and contested within the organisation. This article focuses on what happens to the norm of gender justice as it

travels around a large international NGO. This study contributes to a wider research programme "Global norms and heterogeneous development organisations" (GLONO), which explores how global norms on gender equality have been translated into policy within seven different international agencies. Within my case study on Oxfam GB, the perception of progress on these goals ebbs and flows because gender becomes entangled in a myriad of bureaucratic pressures. I describe funding pressures and imperatives, contestations of meaning, and power struggles within Oxfam GB and argue that gender justice becomes entangled in both internal and the external politics of international development.

The idea of international development as a political world is not new; most influentially Ferguson wrote about how the political nature of development allowed the state in Lesotho to consolidate its power, disguising the politics by treating the process of a development project as if it is technical (1990). Whether development operates as a form of governmentality derived from the ideas of Foucault (such as Ferguson and, in a subtler form, Li 2007), or as a political field with various actors and institutions engaged in power struggles (e.g., Ribiero 2002), or possibly both, the political sociology of development tends to put 'power' centre stage. When development professionals themselves talk about development as 'political', they too tend to assume that politics is about redistributing wealth and challenging power inequalities in the 'aid chain'. But anthropologist Olivier de Sardan describes development more persuasively as a political 'arena' with two kinds of power: power that everyone has and power that only some people have, which in combination constitute an arena (2005:186). In political arenas individuals and groups struggle, use their networks and manoeuvre to influence development and appropriate material or symbolic gain for themselves or their group. Some individuals or groups secure advantages, and even maintain them if they can, making the competition played on unequal terms (ibid: 190). Olivier de Sardan's 'arena' departs from Bourdieu's 'field' by allowing elbow room for individuals, while Bourdieu ultimately always returns to an analytical concept of structure in which individual power and

agency get lost. So in this contemporary history of Oxfam GB I take up Olivier de Sardan's specific understanding of political arenas when analysing the struggles over ideas, norms and relationships between individuals and groups within Oxfam GB.

The inherently political nature of gender has of course been a strand of feminist literature since the 1970s and more specifically explored within scholarship on gender framing and mainstreaming within institutions working in international development (e.g., Goertz 1997, Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007, Rai 2008, Eyben and Turquet 2013).[1] The emphasis of much of this scholarship is on the politics of gender in the sense of analysing how and why a goal (such as gender mainstreaming) is being achieved or resisted, furthering our understanding about how to challenge gender-based inequality and injustice. As example, Hendriks (2011) writes about how technocratic corporate culture is in opposition to gender equality so that feminists' political strategies are often met with resistance: their discourse is watered down, their rules are ignored and their budgets reduced. Success often depends on committed individuals, so 'The risk is that gender mainstreaming, understood as a tool for transformative change in the hands of politically minded feminists, may still result in a depoliticized and technocratic process, devoid of an essential power critique' (ibid: 629). Feminists in a volume edited by Eyben reveal the importance of understanding their political environment, including power relations (Rao 2013), fragmentation within political structures (Manuh, Anyidoho and Pobee-Hyaford 2013), and opportunities for alliances (O'Neill 2013). Considering the vital importance for feminists of responding to these pressures, the political processes involved in navigating power, change and opportunities deserve more attention. This article will build on this scholarship, but with an emphasis on how feminists' work is changing. I investigate the way in which

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[1] See also *Gender & Development*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (July 2005), Mainstreaming: A Critical Review

as well as further examples as listed by this Journal:

http://www.genderanddevelopment.org/page/beyond-GM-Resources#GM, accessed 10th August 2017.

the highly skilled, difficult political *work* of gender mainstreaming has increased in complexity due to bureaucratic pressures.

This research is based on participation-observation fieldwork in one 'affiliate' (or branch) of Oxfam International: Oxfam GB, mainly focusing on the headquarters in Oxford. Oxfam affiliates are in the process of creating one confederation across the world with a single management structure at country level and regional structures that are directly accountable to Oxfam International (OI), with its headquarters in the Global South, all guided by one strategic plan. Oxfam International's vision (2013-19) is to 'change the world', including itself. The different Oxfams in the Global North will lead on various aspects and relationships with other regions. This process of internationalizing is referred to as 2020 within Oxfam. My case study involved researching one of the Oxfams in the Global North – Oxfam GB's – and most intensely its work on gender between July 2014 and December 2015 through a mix of interviews (face to face and on Skype), observation of meetings (both internal and with external partners or donors), participating in two week-long workshops, analysing on-line training, strategies and reviews, and both historical and contemporary policy and programme documents. Since Oxfam GB and International have such a strong influence on each other, I interviewed three OI staff (two of whom were gender specialists) as well. For Oxfam International and Oxfam GB I analysed and wrote reports from a gender and governance perspective on a sample of nineteen country strategies (four African, twelve Asian, one Middle Eastern and two Pacific Islands). Nearly all my visits were to Oxfam House, the headquarters of Oxfam GB (OGB), but I also spent a week with OGB gender advisors from across Asia in Bangkok in 2015 and held interviews about strategy with Oxfam and partners in one Asian office in early 2017. In 2016 I discussed an earlier draft of this article with Oxfam staff, and received comments from both them and scholars within our wider programme, which were incorporated into subsequent drafts.

To say Oxfam staff were busy during this fieldwork would be a chronic understatement; this meant arranging interviews with staff was difficult at the start. Funding cuts, global and local restructuring, frequent travel, huge numbers of meetings and staff changes during this period all created an intense pressure on time. Initially many staff were reluctant to talk about specific gender initiatives if progress was slow, because it might reflect badly on the organisation. However, eventually I was not only invited to observe meetings but encouraged to 'debrief' afterwards and share reflections on what I had heard. My main link person within Oxfam GB changed twice. The first link person arranged a workshop in July 2014 during which we discussed which initiative would be most appropriate to study. I explained that I was interested in how ideas about gender travel around Oxfam, what influences these discussions, and what this reveals about politics and policy-making within international development NGOs? We decided that gender mainstreaming would be most revealing but this focus was subsequently changed by a senior manager to a specific women's empowerment programme that brought together projects on women's economic, social and political empowerment. Although I studied this for many months, once it became obvious that this was a fundraising package rather than a new programme, I eventually moved my attention to processes of strategy development for gender work more generally, rather than a specific initiative.

In the next section a history of Oxfam GB's gender justice vision and policy will take us from the mid 1980s to 2014. I will then describe some of the specific negotiations between gender advisors and other groups in the organisation. Finally I will analyse how ideas about gender are contested within the political arena of Oxfam GB and then consider what this tells us about how ideas travel between and within organisations.

A history of gender justice in Oxfam GB 1986-2013

To understand contemporary gender work within Oxfam GB, its own specific history of feminisms has to be understood, because people in organisations act in ways that both repeat the patterns of the past but also respond to changing circumstances, new actors and fresh demands (Lewis 2009). This history has received the attention of many insider academics, all portraying the goal of gender equality as contested and failing to live up to its rhetoric even if their explanations of resistance vary (e.g., Pialek 2008, Sweetman 1999, Smyth 2013, Wallace 1999, Mukhopadhyay 2007, Wong 2013). The gender story within Oxfam began with tension in the mid 1980s. Oxfam had a dedicated Gender and Development Unit (GADU), which reported in 1986 that there was a 'very deep resistance to accepting gender as an issue' (Wong 2013: 99). GADU staff were sent grant applications to comment on but mostly only received those concerned with women rather than what was seen as general development (Williams 1999: 184). 'Gender' was equated with 'women' and the relational aspects of gender were rarely understood. As Tina Wallace, one of its early gender advisors relates, GADU staff were accused of interfering with other cultures, even engaged in cultural imperialism, and asked whether they were all dykes or: "What are you GADU ladies plotting today?" If they complained, the riposte was: "Can't you take a joke?" (Wallace 1999: 188). She adds, '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' (ibid: 189).

GADU staff were once referred to as the 'gender police' or the 'gender thought police', partly because their role was seen as spotting mistakes or transgressions and also because they halted projects that were seen as gender blind. One manager claimed that they made those who did not know about gender feel inadequate (Wong 2013: 163). Gender advisors were often in a double bind: if they tried to raise gender when it was forgotten they were seen as complaining and negative; if they failed to do so then they were accused of not doing their job when it came to light later. In 1993 the unit was renamed the Gender Team and downgraded in authority.

Managers decided that gender should be the responsibility of all staff, so GADU was replaced with the idea that gender would be mainstreamed. Internally 'mainstreaming gender' meant that it was no longer merely the preserve of gender experts, who tended to be influenced by feminism, so that gender took on a less political meaning.

Before GADU's downgrading, it had produced Oxfam's first gender policy in 1993 but ten years later, the 2003 gender policy was, according to Wong who worked at Oxfam 2002-08, a dilution of the earlier version – downplaying the diversity and agency of women as well as their subordination. The shift was away from women's rights towards gender-related poverty reduction benefitting men and women (ibid: 127). The 2003 policy sounds vaguer, partly in recognition of past failures and to avoid promising the impossible; for example from: 'We will prioritise work that raises the status of women due to systemic oppression women face' to: 'We will often prioritise work that raises the status of women' (ibid: 133). Managers edited the 2003 policy to make it more practical and do-able, according to a contemporary gender advisor, while a member of staff in the marketing division did the final edit. The 1993 policy was apparently influenced by activists while the latter one was crafted by new types of aid professionals – managers and marketers. The politics within the organisation was being tamed along similar lines in most UK-based INGOs: the language of development shifted from 'solidarity' with social movements to working with poor people, including women. The history of gender in Oxfam reveals some of the familiar struggles, gaps, and contradictions that are found within most large INGOs (Crewe and Axelby 2013).

Since 1993 the prominence of gender as a goal has increased within Oxfam not only within Oxfam GB but throughout the whole federation. Years of work by gender advisors, publications like the Oxfam gender training manual and Gender and Development Journal, and sympathetic allies in other departments, as well as a global development rhetoric about the importance of gender equality, have combined

to change the status of gender in Oxfam. Both governance and gender are 'at the heart' of the current strategic plan which guides the whole federation. The 'theory of change' for OI and, therefore, the whole of global Oxfam including Oxfam GB, begins:

> 'At the heart of Oxfam's work is a theory of change that sees the interaction between active citizens and accountable states as fundamental to human development. Oxfam mainly focuses on the first of these, helping to build the organizational capacity of the organizations of poor people, with a particular focus on women's leadership and attitudes and beliefs concerning gender roles.' (Oxfam 2013:10).

The first goal promotes people's 'right to be heard: people claiming their right to a better life' and emphasises, 'we will particularly focus on supporting women and youth because deep-rooted inequalities of societal power are often gender- and generation- based' (ibid: 14). The second aims to advance gender justice – which can be 'exacerbated by class, ethnicity and age, as well as religious and other fundamentalism' – through political empowerment, greater control of resources, attitudinal and legal change, improved access to services and better partnerships with civil society and the private sector (ibid: 16).

Oxfam GB's gender advisors not only supported the OI vision, they were influential in creating it. In their telling of this history, the process of influencing the strategy development is clearly represented in political terms. Given the importance of the 2020 process which is bringing all the Oxfam affiliates closer within the confederation, the OI strategic plan has proved influential as the repository of foundational policies and directions for the organization, gender advisors related. OGB's gender advisors and other sympathizers directly and purposefully influenced the contents of the OISP, so that it reflected feminist values and positions. These had been agreed in the official OI Gender Justice Conceptual Framework of 2008,

spelling out the basic principles of OIs thinking on gender justice. They did so in a coordinated manner with other colleagues performing comparable roles within the other major affiliates. OI Gender Working Groups were mobilized for this purpose, and the gender advisors that peopled them were allocated to the different task forces established to develop positions and approaches for the OISP components, each reflecting Oxfam's goals: livelihood, food security, governance, gender justice, humanitarian responses, climate change. Coordination among them meant that the gender positions promoted within each goal were coherent with each other. Long agreed and espoused positions were successfully argued for by the gender advisors: as example, the link between gender and power, the emphasis on women's collective action (and thus the need to work with women's rights organizations), and the importance of having both a mainstreaming and a standalone approach. This coordination, often informal and invisible, was possible thanks to the strong and long-term personal relationships between many of the gender advisors, through which mutual trust and knowledge of individual skills had been built over years. It was not a question of values and norms being agreed as a priority and cascaded down, in business speak, through Oxfam; it was through informal politics.

Since OI sets the vision for all Oxfams, this is the vision that all Oxfam affiliates should follow. In June 2014 OI also approved a plan for integrating gender throughout the work: '*Beyond Gender Mainstreaming 2014-2019: Oxfam Road Map and Action Plan for Putting Women's Rights at the Heart of All We Do*'. This explicitly positions Oxfam as a 'thought leader' on gender justice with a progressive and ambitious policy on gender and women's rights. 15% of Oxfam's expenditure will be invested in stand-alone women's rights programmes, but gender will also be mainstreamed across all the programmes including 'saving lives' or humanitarian work and economic justice.

This collective action by gender advisors to influence strategy documents does not mean that they all agree with each other. Varying opinions among the ten permanent

Oxfam GB gender justice advisors (four in Oxford and 6 in other regions[2]) emerge out of differences in age, length of service, position in the formal hierarchies, between the cultural contexts of different countries. Even more profound differences in approach can be found between gender advisors employed by different affiliates. Furthermore, the complexity of gender justice work creates contradictions even for individuals. An example of this can be found in most gender training courses held within Oxfam GB. Most of their gender training courses attempt to make connections between individual experience of gendered inequality and socio-political patterns in wider society. One course about gender and advocacy I attended for gender advisors attempted to do this but one participant who was new to Oxfam GB was disappointed. She pointed out that to do feminist advocacy effectively she needed a detailed analysis of power relations within the huge bureaucracy of the Oxfam confederation. "Where is the discussion of power relations in Oxfam?" she asked. The political world of the bureaucracy of Oxfam and its various affiliates has become so complex that analyzing its power relations has become an integral part of the work of all its staff. It is against this backdrop of history and intention that contemporary gender advisors are guiding parts of the organization to try and put the policy into practice.

Negotiating over money for gender justice 2014-2015

By 2014 the process of internationalizing ('2020' in Oxfam speak) had become so complex and demanding that meetings set up to discuss gender often required half the time to be spent exchanging news about 2020. The other main bureaucratic exigency was funding pressure. When the new Chief Executive Officer, Mark Goldring, had taken up the post of leading Oxfam GB (OGB) in 2013 he signalled his

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[2] This number changes over time but was true in November 2015. Other gender experts can be found within specific teams or projects – whether in OGB HQ or in projects they fund overseas – and many other staff identify as feminists but do not necessarily have 'gender' within their job title.

commitment to gender justice by saying that OGB aimed to be the 'go-to agency' on women's rights. Bearing in mind the Oxfam International commitment to spending 15% on stand-alone women's rights work – more than triple OGB's actual level – and the squeeze on funding, it was clear that new sources of income were urgently needed. The CEO tasked Oxfam's marketing department with developing a 'case for support' to raise £50-100m from corporates and high net worth supporters for women's empowerment programming. So the idea that women's empowerment was important to Oxfam's identity was coming from the very top.

The initial impetus was to emphasise women's *economic* empowerment, as this was seen as both a strength of existing Oxfam GB programming and an issue that would be relevant to private sector funders. However, the advisors in gender programming stressed that effective economic empowerment for women cannot be achieved without also tackling the social and political dimensions. They feared that in the rush for funding this dominance of economics could become policy for Oxfam's gender work by default and not merely a message for marketing. So a fundraising brochure was developed which explained the need for a holistic approach to women's empowerment, setting out multi-million pound funding requirements to support programming on enterprise development for women, increasing women's voice and political participation, and stopping violence against women. However, the potential corporate sponsors wanted to cut the political work and before long, behind the scenes a familiar conflict emerged. The gender advisers were perceived as worrying about language when the urgent moral imperative was to raise funds in a difficult climate, with 125 jobs cut in 2013.[3] The fundraisers were seen as betraying Oxfam's values, making moral compromises so that the harm might outweigh the good. Their conflicts are created not by feminist versus anti-feminist values so much as different organisational imperatives. The fundraisers are under increasing pressure to raise

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[3] http://www.oxfam.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2013/10/oxfam-announces-cuts, accessed 17th June 2016.

unrestricted funding with simple narratives and images of poor people as vulnerable that appeal to potential supporters. Programmes and policy staff are trying to transform societies and idealising representations of inequality between women and men – stereotypical views of women as hard-working mothers, for example – undermine this aim. Moral accusations follow. At the extreme end of the spectrum, gender experts were seen as supercilious and unrealistic while the fundraisers were viewed as uninterested in the content of the work. One programmes staff member explains, "The gender dynamic is not so much about content, it is characters – people feel personally aggrieved by each other across the divide. Gender creates factions based on relationships, not ideological wars alone." Due to the centrality of funding it is not so much resistance within policy and programmes or senior management that leads to contestations within gender work in OGB HQ; it is antagonism between marketing and programmes.

The holistic women's empowerment programme became like tumbleweed – gathering bits as it was blown by the wind but never settling down. In the words of one about Oxfam's gender work more generally: "we don't know what we need, we don't know what we want, and everything is moving." In early 2015 the new key lead of this empowerment programme (a non-gender specialist) embarked on this task, trawling the database to analyse Oxfam's most inspiring work, its flagship gender projects, and discussing with staff in different offices as well as gender specialists. As custodians of the normative values in gender justice, gender advisors face the impossible task of moulding their work – and the people they aspire to benefit – into commodities that can be consumed by supporters without creating an impossible level of dissonance.

Once the holistic programme had settled into an agreed fundraising package, cross-cutting work on gender within Oxfam GB fell quiet again. The team of gender advisors were waiting to find out what Oxfam offices in the Global South had included within strategies that they had been asked to develop by OI. Their manager

asked me to analyse these from a gender and governance perspective, which I agreed to do pro-bono. I wrote a report on each of the nineteen country strategies that were available in English, with guidance from both OGB and OI gender advisors, and also wrote some general impressions about the whole range of them (Crewe 2015). I concluded that under the influence of the OI strategy, most of the country strategies included a sophisticated political analysis of their context – including an analysis of power and stakeholders' interests – but were constrained by the OI directive that they should have no more than three goals. The scope for responding to the demands of national movements, partners and other stakeholders, and flexibility to deal with significant external change, were both limited by having these three goals.

The country strategies varied hugely in their understanding of, and priorities for, both gender and governance. Nearly all had some objective, or at least indicator, that aimed for gender justice, while a few put gender at the heart of their strategy. Overall gender was given far more attention than other inequalities, although the lack of discussion about diversity meant that 'women' and 'men' were somewhat homogenised in many strategies. Unsurprisingly those that followed more exactly the language of the OI strategy goal on gender justice revealed less of their own thinking about what it might mean in their own context. A few strategies made no commitment to gender justice, posing a difficult question for the OI secretariat. How can they achieve compliance to their vision on gender justice when they have so little funding to offer and, therefore, limited clout in practice?[4] OGB's influence on gender and governance was clear, however. They have both funding and the advice of a network of gender advisors worldwide to offer. Meetings within one Asian country highlighted the difficulties of consulting with partner organisations on these countries strategy: on the one hand, the gender advisors wanted to consult women's

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[4] The findings were similar to those of internal advisors but this piece of pro-bono work was methodologically significant to my research; some Oxfam staff could see more tangibly that I was on 'their side' in sharing their political perspective of development.

organisations and get their advice and buy-in for designing progressive gender justice objectives, but on the other hand, some partner organisations did not want to spend huge amounts of time discussing Oxfam's internal strategy and planning. Partners favour flexibility, so that they can influence Oxfam's direction over time in response to changing circumstances, but Oxfam was under pressure to prioritise and create coherence across its network.

The middle of 2015 witnessed a sudden burst of new high profile activity on gender within Oxfam House with the recruitment of two gender specialists: – a new Senior Gender Advisor to work on programmes and a Women's Rights Director to work at an even more senior level to embed gender within all departments of Oxfam GB including marketing. Oxfam GB's leadership decided that the only way to turn the gigantic ship of Oxfam GB towards making women's rights central to all its work was to have a champion at a very senior level. Between them they were expected to give a boost to the process of 'putting women's rights at the heart of everything Oxfam does'. They knew that their job was not the *creation* of gender policy. The content of 'gender justice' was clearly conceptualised as a mix of social, political and economic processes, already in the OI vision and strategy, with the links as framed by the Gender at Work Framework (Kelleher and Rao 2015). Partly on the basis of this framework, internal rules and guidelines about how to mainstream gender were already well-established across Oxfam GB. Mainstreaming is outlined in a gender 'road map', which each affiliate, including Oxfam GB, has translated into its own version. Part of their road map entails Oxfam GB committing to have stand-alone programmes (partly because stand-alone work improves the organisation's capacity for gender mainstreaming), to have women's rights organisations as partners as a matter of course, and to spend at least 15% of investment on women's rights.

So gender advisors were not in the business of creating or contesting the existing parameters of gender policy but rather what to prioritise. Some wanted to give prominence to women's empowerment but gender advisors insisted that it should not

be up to OGB to decide on their own; such decisions should be taken in countries. Such struggles over resource allocation are intensely political and, like any political activity, require winning allies at the right moment rather than merely insisting on a particular understanding of gender from an isolated position. The gender specialists knew that they had to get the leadership to back certain decisions about investing unrestricted funding. Knowing the culture of Oxfam as they did, and bearing in mind that such knowledge is essential for doing politics well in any environment, they needed get the latest knowledge and buy-in from Oxfam staff in the South. They wanted to ensure that their development of a gender justice strategy for Oxfam GB was based on the experience of the regions. So they invited Oxfam GB's regional gender advisors from across the world to discuss priorities and tactics and facilitated meetings between them and senior people in Oxfam House. The complexity of Oxfam as a confederation was becoming so huge that the majority of the time was spent 'sharing knowledge' about what was happening in the bureaucracy, by whom, where and why. As different people joined the gender advisors in their meetings, mostly in person but occasionally by Skype, introductions and explanations about what they knew took up sizeable proportions of time.

Agreement emerged about the meaning and imperatives of gender justice, making judgements about which type of programmes deserved investment relatively easy. An international governance programme that had transformed women's political position – Raising Her Voice – and another to challenge violence against women and girls – We Can – were frequently championed as progressive flagship models to follow. The more contentious areas arose out of the diversity between regions or countries and their relationship to OGB's head office. Latin American countries were more overtly political than other regions, including in their choice of partners and their approach to working with them. They tended to work closely with women's rights organisations and social movements, but steered away from faith-based and private sector organisations. While the more radical offices, or individuals within any offices, saw private sector organisations mainly as targets of advocacy, a few in

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Oxfam House were in favour of close partnership with companies to harness their potential to reach far more beneficiaries – millions rather than thousands, as one senior manager promised. Some saw faith-based organisations as inappropriate partners, dominated by men and unsympathetic to feminism, others deemed it important to make use of their influence. Discussion about whether to work primarily with women's rights organisations, or to have them in coalitions with access to more powerful NGOs as well, also took place between gender advisors. With exceptions, gender advisors from the regions tended toward facilitating partner organisations to make these decisions while UK-based senior managers thought practically speaking OGB needed to decide on how to prioritise. Linked to this were questions about whether gender justice was best served by developing Oxfam's capacity and funding, or that of women's rights organisations in countries. Occasionally intersectionality was mentioned, with someone suggesting that other inequalities deserved some attention – disability, LGBT, age, as examples – but most seemed to view the task of getting gender taken more seriously as demanding enough.

The senior gender advisors digested the results of their discussions, and conducted a series of reviews and analyses (including of the country strategies), which they wrote up into a 65 page document for consideration by OGB leadership.[5] Armed with the views and experiences of their gender advisors from around the world, they made the case that Oxfam had some excellent gender justice projects but at current levels of investment would fail to match its rhetoric about women's rights being at the heart of their work. Treating the internal process of advocacy as analogous to promoting women's rights in society, they worked out their tactics carefully, discussing at every point how to navigate the cultural and political landscape they were operating in. The gender advisors were skilled political strategists. The mix of well-argued analysis, statistics and explanation of highly participatory process of consultation in this detailed review impressed the few key senior managers who read

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[5] OGB's Gender Justice and Women's Rights Review and Programmatic Strategic Framework 2015-2018.

early drafts. With the help of one of these managers, they produced a short version to be presented to OGB's most senior managers at a strategy meeting.

The senior managers met for the strategy meeting in November 2015 to discuss priorities for the future. Once again a substantial proportion of the day was taken up with explanations of the background to the strategy discussion on gender justice work. And once again it was clear that the most contentious decisions in programmes revolved around who to work with – that is, the proportion of women's, faith-based and private organisations to have as partners – and who decides. The key constraint was, gender advisors explained, insufficient resources (both people and investment) to make gender justice happen. Existing commitments were presented as percentages and it was explained that despite the aim of allocating of 15% expenditure to women's rights in recent years in their budgets, in terms of actual expenditure women's rights had only consumed 5%. If only unrestricted[6] funding is included, then over the last five years it was on average 10% but with marked differentials ranging from 1% in one region, up to 17% in two other regions, and 6% in the UK. Most senior managers agreed that some regions needed to commit to spending far more on women's rights. One Regional Director suggested 50% of unrestricted funding should be allocated to women's rights to make sure OGB hit the target of 15% overall. Another strongly agreed and added, 'if we don't make this decision then shame on us.' But a third senior manager claimed it was the wrong moment. With the backing of a few others in the room, this third director (a man) made the argument that they needed to look at all the lines in their budgets before allocating a percentage to women's rights. What was the point in allocating a percentage if there wasn't that much funding available after existing commitments were allocated, he asked? No decision was made during the meeting but subsequently a senior manager in Oxfam House (a woman) stipulated that 15% on

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[6] This is funding that is not committed to specific projects or activity through agreements with donors or supporters but is allocated by Oxfam.

women's rights work for all departments in Oxfam GB would be a requirement after all. Whether this translates into reality remains to be seen, but the gender advisors had once again accomplished a political gain in the hard process of negotiating for gender justice. According to gender advisers, the resistant man had a history of blocking women's rights while the woman had been an active supporter of women's rights.

The twists and turns in the recent developments in gender work in OGB are messy, confusing and many-layered. The experience of working in Oxfam at the time of the global internationalization process has this character, an accentuated form of normal INGO everyday reality in an organisation that is larger, more complex and faster changing than most. In the next section I consider what this kind of environment does to the nature of political work entailed in working for gender justice.

Political work and the complexity of ideas

The historical change in gender advisors' work within Oxfam GB in part reflects internal shifts within this context-specific cultural and political setting but is in part a response to external change as well. Two earlier academic interpretations – by Pialek (2008) and Smyth (2013) – reveal how the internal dynamics have changed. Nicholas Pialek's research on gender within Oxfam analyses a resistance to mainstreaming gender across programmes. He attributes this to Oxfam's refusal to distinguish between organisational values, individual ideology and norms. An internal review reveals that not only was gender poorly integrated but that the policy even allowed staff to ignore gender if the work was classified as being outside the priority gender area (2008: 281). His own research indicates that gender had been mainstreamed into the organisational values, rhetoric and strategy but was weak within programme implementation. He rejects the idea expressed elsewhere (e.g., he cites Moser and Moser 2005) that it is enough to explain this by referring to a

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male-bias culture or even patriarchal conspiracy (2008: 285). After all Oxfam's gender policy even then stated that gender relations needed to be transformed. He claims that the resistance to gender can be found in the values of individuals, not the organisational culture in an abstract sense, because they clash with feminist assumptions and ideals. One of these arises from positionality, meaning that gender can only be mainstreamed if tackled internally within Oxfam. A manager typified this attitude with the following: "always thinking about ourselves is pathetic ..., we need to look at what we can change in the world" (ibid: 292). Pialek concludes, 'gender mainstreaming has failed because the process of change has failed to challenge directly and develop the values of individuals in the organization' (ibid: 295). In contemporary OGB the values of individuals based in Oxfam House are broadly supportive of the international vision for gender justice in the programmes areas, even if marketing has other imperatives. So Pialek's conclusion still has efficacy, but other currents are needed to explain the latest developments too – a point I will return to.

Ines Smyth, another gender specialist within Oxfam who has done research on their gender policy, compares progress with another institution – the Asian Development Bank – and comes up with a different, but not incompatible, perspective. Contrary to what she expected, ADB institutionalized gender more successfully within its programmes partly because it has a far more hierarchical structure. Oxfam's culture of egalitarianism, with its habit of thorough consultation through meetings, made it easier for gender to fall through the gaps (Smyth 2013). To take a more recent example of this leeway, in 2006 Oxfam's strategic framework committed to spending 20% of its budget on gender work but for regional managers this was communicated in a way that was open to interpretation, as one explained to Wong:

> "What I am saying to the team, don't start re-planning your whole programme because this is not coming down as a dictate and everyone has to spend 20%. This is an idea that has come out of the meeting with the Director of Oxfam, it's

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going to feed into a strategy. For me what is important is the direction setting rather than the target. So don't get hung up on the 20% figure. Let's see where that goes." (Wong 2013: 81).

But Oxfam's egalitarian culture is changing. One of the regional directors managed to defer the decision to ring-fence 15% for gender work during the November 2015 meeting but then a senior manager established during the meeting that there were no objections in principle and enacted this rule subsequently in any case. Oxfam staff told me frequently that the safest way to get an enduring decision is to get one out of a very senior manager. So it may be getting harder in some areas of Oxfam to treat gender justice as a peripheral issue, which a minority of staff are still inclined to do, but if supporters of women's rights lose their position of seniority this is likely to change. Feminism has a fragility in Oxfam because whether or not the norms within the goal of gender justice gain support is contingent on the representation of advocates at the most senior level. Hierarchies are shifting and becoming more pronounced across Oxfam. Control over budgets is being moved from affiliates in the Global North to Oxfam International, in theory. At the same time, the affiliates that raise the most money (Oxfam GB being one of the biggest) retain considerable power. With more intense battles over resources as power shifts globally, and huge pressure on staff time, senior managers issue more and more rules and guidance to retain control. So there is the uncomfortable possibility, suggested by Smyth, that the increasing hierarchy may mean that evasion of gender justice policy is becoming (or at least might become) more difficult as long as feminism is represented within senior management.

In contemporary Oxfam GB only the occasional glint of public hostility towards women's rights emerges in public conversations between staff because it is well known that it will be frowned upon, at least by some. As examples of the occasional antagonism, when told that women's rights are 'at the heart of everything we do', some men (and even women) ask, "what about men's rights?" One manager in an

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African office complained at the prospect of being told to invest more in women's rights, "but we are not a women's organisation." However, such stories are relatively rare. One feminist manager put it like this, "There isn't really huge resistance within Oxfam to women's rights. Money is pivotal in making things happen. To get things done you have to know how the organization works… our resources are finite. Academics tend to look at policy but actually it is the funding that has influence." It may be the case that money has been important within Oxfam for many years but the raising and spending of funds has become even more central to all decision-making since a decline in income over the last decade. At the same time, like all INGOs based in the UK, because OGB is facing increasing competition for funds, the struggle to secure strong and coherent commitment to gender justice is not over. In the competition for shrinking resources the gender advisors from around the world act as a collective to try and secure resources for women's rights work. The creation of a 'holistic' women's rights programme would have benefitted all gender work and avoided competition between social, economic and political programmes (never mind the problems of splitting these aspects of women's lives). But according to some staff, the way that senior managers forced gender advisors to prioritise meant that they were pitched into an unusual and subtle competition against each other – specialists in political transformation or violence, for example, against those working in unpaid care work – in contradiction with their customary collaborative way of working.

Such interaction sounds familiarly resonant of the power politics that Olivier de Sardan (2005) describes – sometimes competitive and sometimes collaborative – but as he points out, power struggles are not the only important process in politics. The reactions to gender justice norms are far more than a struggle over resources. Oxfam staff at all levels of the organisation talk about problems of resources but they talk about wanting to transform, rather than merely tinker with, the lives of women for 'personal' reasons. When I asked an Oxfam male member of staff from South Asia why he took gender justice so seriously he replied that he saw it through the eyes of

his mother. Once he became part of the women's movement, his identity was bound up with helping not only his mother but women in general. The analysis and aims of global norms of gender equality have resonance for so many women within Oxfam, and some men as well, because they have direct experience of gender inequality themselves. Whether gender justice is work inspired by people's socio-political relations at home and other workplaces, or resisted by some because they are uncomfortable at the idea of working for a women's organisation, the politics of gender is bound up with identity. So the travelling norm of gender justice is political in terms of power struggle, work and identity.

The work of feminists in Oxfam GB has certainly changed over the years but at the same time, one of its enduring qualities, like all development agencies, is that the work entails doing politics in different senses. Anthropology Jonathan Spencer describes politics as 'that compelling but morally unsettling space in which friend is differentiated from foe…' (2007: 180). In that case gender work undoubtedly often takes a political form within Oxfam and has been visibly so since the creation of a Gender and Development Unit, as the history above illustrates. Whether it is managers complaining that the gender advisors are unrealistic and too inward-looking, gender advisors despairing of anti-feminist values or fundraisers blaming programmes for failing to communicate clearly, the differentiation of friend from foe or ally from opponent is obvious. When gender work has this conflictual character then interaction becomes especially emotionally charged and personally felt, sometimes painfully. Although I have written about such social conflicts and internal bureaucratic demands (such as internationalisation) as if they are separate from externally-created pressures, they are also interconnected in practice. The changeable internal factions are strongly influenced by interaction with three marketplaces.

In the first marketplace, raising money from members of the public, marketing departments of large NGOs assume that the work has to be commodified into

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images that represent development as help for the innocent poor. In the second marketplace, the one described by my first narrative, the work of INGOs is increasingly being commodified for non-development specialist organisations, whether rich individuals, foundations or private sector organisations, that would like to invest in charity. Corporate organisations tend to want to invest in a politically sanitised version of development that satisfy their business interests as well as their idea of themselves as morally benign (Crewe and Axelby 2013: 63-65). Finally the third marketplace contains the 'institutional' donors who tend to share a more progressive, and even political, perspective on what is needed in development and gender justice. These donors' assumptions are shaped by neoliberal discourses in different ways from non-development specialists but also different ways from each other (see Cold-Ravnkilde et al, this volume). But there are common threads. Poverty is a series of deficits experienced by categories or statistical groups of individuals from which they can be freed by investment, training and better management. In response to what has been seen as a failure to achieve impact at scale, the demands of 'New Public Management' and an explosion of audit (Power 2003) have entered into development grant-making and partnerships. Organisations and projects are continually audited and judged against a hierarchy of objectives and targets so they bend towards more easily measurable plans with less flexibility and room for manoeuvre as every year goes by. In the service of accountability to Boards and donors, the process of development is being depoliticised by the demands of New Public Management. Oxfam's country strategies are a bid to try to comply with the depoliticised demands of New Public Management on the one hand – with its focused goals and measurable targets – and the political vision of OI on the other – with its power analysis of stakeholders and tackling of issues like women's rights, tax dodging and citizen accountability. Thus Oxfam GB's engagement in these marketplaces is complicated by the influence of new public management discourses and their incompatibility with more political interpretations of the norms contained within gender equality. These expectations underline how difficult the political work of raising funding can be.

There are different priorities and meanings encoded in the way gender is conceived within the three marketplaces but also inherent contradictions between the expectations of all supporters and the realities on the ground. Gender specialists have no choice but to shapeshift between these contradictory demands, representing various gender goals as different norms depending upon the context.

Implications for debates about travelling norms

This shapeshifting portrayal of feminist work challenges some influential views on norm diffusion. This is relevant to the wider research question of our research programme about how ideas travel from, into and around different agencies. For Stone the diffusion of ideas means "that policy change occurs by osmosis; something that is contagious rather than chosen" (2012: 484). But the precise processes involved in 'contagion' get less attention. Theories postulating that ideas, norms or rationalities are diffused, as if they have a life of their own, have been critiqued by anthropologists (and other social scientists), who tend to assume that norms are always embedded in social life with its complex mix of politics, economics and culture. For example, Mosse argues that ideas may travel, but: 'Development's policy prescriptions are socially embedded from the point of departure and from then on are repeatedly translated (perhaps unrecognisably) into the interests and incentives of diverse groups of bureaucrats, local workers or poor people' (2007: 7).

So the concept of translation is an improvement on diffusion, but does not go far enough on its own – once you have a hard look at both embodied and symbolic processes of relating then translation is revealed as an over-simplification. Since norms are embedded in culture and social relations, whether and how the norms shift depends on who people are interacting with, the power relations between them and what else is happening in the social environment. As Engberg-Pedersen et al explain the contingent nature of changing norms means that patterns can be found

(this volume). For example it is clear that gender policy implementation is a political process entailing "struggles over meanings and pragmatic measures [...] in order to determine courses of action and pursue specific gains" (Woodford-Berger, 2007: 126). Underlying these struggles are power shifts, acts of defiance and hierarchies between people engaged in everyday social relations through meetings, documents and conversations. In the updating of the 1993 gender policy in 2003, in creating a fundraising package in 2014, and in agreeing gender strategies in 2015, the gender specialists and marketers/managers had different audiences; the former wanted to change practice in the organization, the latter were as concerned with marketing Oxfam to outsiders. So the study of gender in Oxfam means understanding the multiple perspectives and hierarchies in the organization, both formal and informal. The norms within Oxfam GB's gender justice work are not merely translated but the symbolic material (such as policy documents) used as benign and useful weapons (or political tools) within power struggles in the competition for resources and the moral tussles over how Oxfam's work is represented.

In this social and political perspective on the process of travelling norms, which highlights the importance of relationships and hierarchies, I do not intend to deny the importance of either individual agency or the possibility that ideas seem to acquire a magnetism even when they are disembodied because they resonate in a time and place. This kind of resonance may be true of gender inequality in the most general sense, with all major donors and international organisations repeating the same phrases and rhetoric. But how does this work? Benford and Snow suggest that for a frame to create resonance it has to have consistency, empirical credibility and, increasingly, credible claims-makers (2000: 619). The idea of gender inequality triggers echoes with people's experience, and the claim-makers – certainly donor agencies but even some women's organisations – lend credibility to it as an idea. But the idea of consistency between the goal of gender equality and the track record of implementation fails the test in this instance and many others (Mosse 2005), without the goal losing resonance.

There are two problems with Benford and Snow's, and associated, ideas of frame resonance and one of them relates to how they conceptualise frames in the first place. For them, 'collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization' (2000: 614). Thus, they split belief and meaning-making from social and political relations, as if 'beliefs' could have a life beyond action and the processes of doing culture and navigating power. This then leads to the second problem when they consider how and why frames are 'contested' in everyday processes of relating. They cite Ellingson's analysis of how riots about abolitionism involved contradictory responses that first enabled and then limited opportunities for collective action (as cited by Benford and Snow ibid: 627), showing how the influence of ideas tends to unfold in unexpected ways, changed and changing not only the environment but the ideas themselves. Their attempt to create a more complex model of frames and action by pointing to yet another grid of categories – in this case the roles of political opportunity, culture and audience – merely puts another layer on top of the various elements they are highlighting in the social environment. Categorising does not have explanatory power without accounting for change. A theory about the *movement* of ideas is needed, as Benford and Snow acknowledge, that explains the relationship between individual and collective identity, framing and emotion, and process and action (ibid: 631-633) but also brings in power and culture taking account of history, present and anticipating the future.

One theory that explains the movement of thought without merely resorting to the classification of elements is complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey and Mowles 2016). Although presented as a theory of change within organisations, this meta-theory can be seen as offering the philosophical underpinnings of socio-political history. In part springing out of a critique of the split between individualism and systems theory, they draw on a mixture of complexity science, sociology, American pragmatism and group analytical theory to generalise about

social action and interaction. For our purposes their theory has three important conclusions: (1) people engage in processes of relating to each other as individuals, with their own unique history, emotions, and values, and create/are created by wider group interaction *at the same time*; (2) the constraints and enablers of power, values and norms mean that when people interact to form and be formed by each other, shifts in power, values and norms are inevitable; (3) complexity means that you never know what kind of patterns local interaction will throw up and what effects this has on wider culture and society.

So when people work on gender justice in Oxfam they bring into it their own experience of gender. This means that when studying how the values and norms underpinning gender shift, we need to investigate who is involved, their separate and shared histories, what forms the interaction between people take and how power constraints or enables those with conflicting interests. To claim change is only brought about by those with power has no empirical basis. Leaders are supposed to formulate visions and values, setting the tone and agenda for others to follow. But as Doug Griffin, another complexity theorist, points out it is in our imagination that leaders embody the idealised whole of an organisation. In reality they only have power if they are recognised as leaders by the less powerful (2002). So what happens to gender in Oxfam is less about what the CEO or other senior leaders *say*, although rhetorical statements have symbolic importance and occasionally decisions have significant practical influence, and more about the configurations created by (and then creating) the interaction by staff across the whole organisation usually over a long period of time. The holistic women's programme, an initiative from the top, was intended to generate a sizeable investment from corporates for an innovative approach. This tumbleweed blew around Oxfam GB consuming time and although the initiative did not result in a funding proposal as intended, partly due to the well-argued objections from regional and UK gender advisors, the conversations between UK gender team members and fundraisers eventually established a more positive and generative way of working which paid off later. Decades of hard

pains-taking work by gender justice advocates, with its seismic ups and downs, was finally paying dividends; it was after senior managers publicly over-ruled those who were deprioritising gender that a new momentum could potentially gather pace. Whether gender justice becomes thoroughly embedded is contingent above all on stronger representation of feminists at the most senior levels of Oxfam GB. Whether or not it this happens to be seen because the struggle for gender justice never seems to settle down.

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