

*A Conversation on Gender - Women and Men Working in International Organizations: Using Research as a Catalyst to Address the Issues of Women*

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## Summary

International organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have a particular organizational culture as a result of the mixing of many cultures in one environment. Moreover, they are not under local law that governs discriminatory acts. In this setting, this dissertation examines the differences between the environment created for women from that created for men and how these differences are manifested. The research technique and approach taken to do this examination will be described along with a discussion on the use of research in changing gender relationships within organizations.

The first chapter examines international organizations and the characteristics that set them apart from other organizations. The second chapter presents the model for research as a tool for organizational intervention. The effectiveness of this model is tested through its application to two different organizations. Chapter 3 discusses the application of the model in one organization followed by a chapter that presents the results of the research. Chapters 5 and 6 do the same for the second organization. The final chapter, Chapter 7, summarizes the entire study and draws conclusions.

Chapter 1 presents the legal and cultural aspects that distinguish international organizations. These organizations are not bound by the laws of any nation. They are governed by Articles of Agreement. For example, the Articles of Agreement for both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund grant their employees immunity from forms of judicial process. Thus, no ruling or law compels the international organizations to look more carefully at their decision-making practices to assure that women are considered fairly. Communication problems resulting from the blend of cultures keep conversation and communication at a bland, superficial level – especially with regard to interpersonal issues. Women from dissimilar cultures find themselves dealing with and facing different issues and have no direct way to communicate them.

Chapter 2 presents a model for using research in an organizational intervention, showing how it can be effective in supporting change in the organization. Research within an organization has the goal of disturbing the social system. Research in an organization is not just about collecting information about the organization, it is about learning what the information means to the organization and how it changes the organization. The Practice Model is for creating change in organizations. When compared to other approaches (discussed in the chapter), the Practice Model is best suited for work within an organization. It uses the largest definition of context, focuses on community rather than separation of the object, is self-

reflexive as it focuses on creating a learning environment, accepts bias as a natural part of learning, is intensively action-oriented, and embraces many methods.

The first step in the Practice Model is to create a core group of staff from the organization who are representative of the sub-groups within the organization. It is this group who receives the data created during the project. The next step is the addition and presentation of data. Using this data, the core group enters into conversation about what the data mean to the organization. The challenge of the consultant is to help the group explore the meaning until the last step when a final unified meaning is determined. Two essential aspects must exist for this model to work, the credibility of the consultant and the created environment in which the conversation occurs.

The credibility of the consultant is important and can be divided into three different aspects: expertise, objectivity, and intentions. Successfully creating the environment in which a conversation on meaning occurs requires the application of a set of specific principles based on the understanding that when questions are asked, learning and change begin immediately.

The first principle is creating trust. The members of the core group, those creating the meaning of the data, must feel they can present their ideas without judgment. Thus, to create trust all actions must be done with respect; no judgments on observations are applied, only impact may be described; and anonymity of the respondents is practiced. Trust welcomes and encourages stories that tell a tale greater than the details and gives insight into the meaning of the data.

The design must support ways for meaning to be created from the findings. This is the second principle. All actions must work to build the community. Creating and recognizing learning opportunities where dialogue within the group facilitates the exploration together of what is being learned. Everyone shares their perspectives and learns to appreciate and value different perspectives rather than entering into a debate. Meaning is created through conversation, and it is important that adequate time is allotted for this to take place.

The third principle is creating impact. This is the point at which the core group decides how to share the message with the institution. It is important for the group to keep in mind that there is a positive relationship between unanimity within the core group and impact of the message on the institution. The experiences and conclusions of the core group should model the realizations and epiphanies that the organization goes through in absorbing the information.

Chapter 3 describes in detail how the organization TDI (fictitious name) used the model to understand the day-to-day practices of the organization and how these practices influenced the work lives of men and women as they worked together. The project was initiated by a group of professional women within the institution, but the purpose was expanded to men and women working together. The group believed this would engage a wider audience.

The design of the project changed almost immediately. The primary change distanced the research team (the consultant) from the core group by requiring only a single contact point between the research team and itself. Faced with these challenges, the study was adjusted so that the findings would be most relevant to the work at hand and done in a manner that would maximize every opportunity for creating new conversations around the findings.

The project began with focus groups to gather issues and begin the transformation process. They provided an open forum where the synergy of cross-discussion and amplification of points made creates efficient data gathering. The focus groups were divided by grade level groupings and by gender in order to create more comfortable environments. The script supported three objectives. The first was to gather

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the information needed. The second objective, but of equal importance, was to create an environment in which the participants could get to know one another better through fuller interaction. The third objective was to motivate and empower the participants to continue the conversations after leaving the focus groups. The questions were written and ordered specifically to have the participants actively realize and define issues in their own vocabulary and terms. (The protocol is included.) The presence of two experienced facilitators assured that the unspoken messages were captured along with the spoken discussion.

The data taken from the focus groups was analyzed in three steps. The first step was to gather as a research team and discuss the issues that each individual believed he or she had seen in the focus groups. Then, for the second step, these overall impressions were recorded, and a detailed review of the responses was done in relation to the issues identified. Lastly, the stories that were told in each session were shared. The like issues were categorized and sub-categorized. This analysis of focus group data provided the foundation on which to build the interview protocol and the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

The interview questions were developed to respond to the identified issues and to continue the positive impact of the research. The interviewing was done by both the research team and by the members of the core group. Although using non-professional interviewers (members of the core group) tends to produce less data, this brought the core group members closer to the data and gave them more time to think about the meaning. More than 150 interviews were conducted across all levels of staff. While final reports can be ignored, the personal interview is a time of engagement. Even though the respondent is answering questions, the interview becomes a time when the topic is on the respondent's mind and insights on the issues are gained.

Responses were gathered through reports from each of the interviewers. Content analysis was done on the data from the interviews. This consisted of determining "completed thoughts" from the interview responses and then categorizing them within topic by the messages found. After the categorization by message, the comments from men and women were separated so that different levels of responses by message could be calculated. Tables were made of the responses by topic, by message contained within topic, and by gender. These became the basis for the discussion on the meaning of the findings. (Examples of these tables are included.)

The planned two-day retreat where the findings were to be explored and interpreted was reduced to approximately a five-hour meeting. TDI lost a lot as a result of this self-imposed limitation. The five hours of reporting was insufficient to allow the members of the Task Force to appreciate the full meaning of the data and come to agreement on the meaning. The Task Force did not develop a unified interpretation of the findings. This was a significant loss, and the burden of communicating the conclusions (and the meaning of the findings) fell to the final report and any communication vehicles developed after the project.

The final report had to immediately establish three points with its readers. The first was to establish the validity of the findings. As a very quantitatively oriented organization, the qualitative nature of interview results could easily be dismissed. The second point was to firmly convince the readers that there was value in reading the report as TDI already had significant common ground between men and women on which to build and strengths in TDI that could be used to deal with the issues found. There was a strong attempt to not affix blame. Third, the report assured the reader knew that as in all analysis, generalizations are made to focus on major findings and trends. Thus, attributions to men or to women must be interpreted as such and not as a reflection on specific individuals. Readers were then able to differ in the particular, even as they were part of building the general and so not dismiss the report.

Chapter 4 discusses the specific issues that came to light as a result of the study of TDI. This chapter preserves as much as possible the original form of the report to the client to present how such a report can be done as well as what was found. (This will be done in Chapter 6 as well for the results of Omega.) The style used captured both the quantitative tables of frequencies and many direct quotations from the interviews to give credibility and life to the discussion of the results.

Women and men were satisfied with the work of TDI for similar reasons. This finding alone was hoped to give the reader a strong incentive to read further. As one male respondent said, "It's not us versus them. It's us together." Even with this strong similarity, the data suggest that several of the organizational structures at TDI, including promotions and the norms associated with working relationships may affect men and women differently.

The promotional process was found to be unclear, appearing to adversely affect women, and having the potential to undermine further the credibility of women staff members. For example, when discussing the actions an individual can take to help get a promotion the most popular answer for men was to 'be assertive'; no women chose this answer. Women's most common response was to 'ask'.

The study also found that the dependence on informal means of operating – especially for feedback – makes it more difficult for everyone to be fully effective and impacts women more because they have fewer avenues for informal connections. As one woman put it, "Most [meetings] are run by unprepared Chairs; they're a waste of time. If people could only focus on the purpose [of the meeting]."

Women's behaviors are judged more severely than men's. For example, men describe other men who are aggressive using positive, strong terminology such as 'not afraid of problems.' They describe women with positive to neutral words. They include 'imitating a man' and 'insists on their position.'

Many men believe that harassment is not an issue, but women see another side. "One man walked right past me and introduced himself to a second man... This is a classic case of invisibility," said one woman. When situations are difficult for women, they are circumspect about their response because sanctions impact women more at TDI. For example, rather than sanction the man, the women's contract is not renewed.

Almost two-thirds of comments about work and family indicated some trouble with balancing the two. This was common for both women and men. But while men tended to talk about their problems, women tended to offer strategies they use to deal with the work/family balance issues.

Support staff at TDI are those individuals who fill in the secretarial positions. Because they are principally women and of lower rank, they face a unique set of issues. Support staff who are women are not treated with the respect due those working in their respective field of endeavor. Support staff are sometimes limited in their contribution because they are not brought into the work; they are not given the context in which the work is being done. Support women experienced more harassment than women in higher ranks. Men are believed to get out of the support ranks more easily and are often mentored through this process. While women and men both experience pressures around work/family issues, the work styles present at TDI, which depend on late hours, more greatly impact support staff's ability to meet their family needs. Support staff and professional women need to get to know one another on a new level of appreciation.

The definition of respect given by both women and men was remarkably similar. So much so that using respectful behavior as the norm in TDI would become a major vehicle for improving the work environment for everyone.

Chapter 5 discusses a second study done in Omega (fictitious name), a different type of organization than TDI yet also international. The major intention of Omega was to learn as much as possible about how women were treated. They fully embraced the Practice Model to create an open environment for better learning. Omega used the research team fully, including work sessions and retreats to take full advantage of the interaction with the team and with each member of the Task Force.

Omega had already formed a Task Force on Women and developed a list of issues. This Task Force became the core group for Omega. A series of activities was designed to explore these issues, and the environment in Omega's Task Force was very supportive. Focus groups were formed and analysis of the resulting data was done in the same way as for TDI. Professional interviewers only were used for one-on-one interviews. On-going meetings between the Task Force and the research team were held. Two, off-site retreats were used for exploring the findings. (Detailed descriptions of the retreats are included in the chapter.) All of these were essential to creating conversation and meaning. The complete and open sharing of the analyzed data helped the Task Force members to accept the qualitative data as real. By the completion of the project everyone on the Task Force believed in the findings, had created a unified meaning of them, and supported the action plan.

The final report was constructed in an original manner for Omega. It was written so that one could scan it to read the conclusions, read the quotations to capture the flavor, or read the text in full. Thus it was ensured that everyone would at least be exposed to the results of the study. As in the case of TDI, Omega's report described what was found without laying blame.

Chapter 6 reports the findings and conclusions for Omega. The format used in this chapter mirrors that used in the final report to the client to once again to demonstrate how results can be communicated to the client. It begins with a review of the environment of Omega and its effect on women as determined by the study. It reminds the reader that given the strong intellectual capability of the managers at Omega, the reported evidence of discrimination can be dealt with thoughtfully.

The major conclusions reported began with finding that women have the characteristics required of Omega's 'best' and often excel in them. It was also determined that women of Omega are held to a more strict set of acceptable behaviors than are men and that women's actions are often misunderstood. Like TDI, behavior that would go unnoticed when used by a man can be misinterpreted when used by a woman. "[Women] have to be seen as not belligerent. "I hate to see a woman take on male characteristics," said one male respondent.

Attitudes in Omega influence behavior in ways that denigrate women daily in many, often reinforcing ways, creating barriers and discrimination that must be overcome. From rudeness to calling women by their first names when men are referred to as Mr. So-and-so, a different environment was created for women.

As in TDI, both women and men expressed concerns about family obligations. Yet, when the women of Omega tended to them, their behaviors were interpreted as a lack of commitment to the work. Ironically, men highlighted dedication as one of women's strengths more often than any other strength named.

Support staff were almost exclusively female in Omega and face special problems. They are not treated as professionals, nor are they consulted in areas most familiar to them. They are seen more as caretakers and asked to do non-job related tasks. Disrespectful, rude, and abusive behaviors are often directed at them by higher-level staff, especially when the higher-level staff are under pressure. Once again, respect is defined similarly by both women and men demonstrating that if the choice is to act with respect, it is more likely to be interpreted correctly.

Unique to Omega's findings involved travel assignments to other countries. Country acceptance is a matter of being "from Omega," not a matter of being a man or a woman. Thus, sending women on major assignments to other countries should never be limited by perceptions that the country would not treat them seriously. However, the travel leader can interfere with or reinforce a woman's acceptance and treatment as a team member. A major part of the work in other countries is negotiation. While men were thought to be more effective in negotiation, the study suggested that it was a matter of style, not effectiveness that distinguished women from men.

Discussing sexual harassment and 'uncomfortable situations' made people being interviewed uncomfortable, especially men. While overt sexual harassment did not exist in Omega, the different perspectives on sexual harassment are analyzed and discussed. The role that managers can play is exemplified in the comment from one woman, "After being put down rather impolitely in a meeting, I saw the manager take the man aside at the end of the meeting. A while later, the man came to my office and offered the olive branch. We were able to work fine together after that."

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions drawn from the two cases and the use of the Practice Model in each. The studies found that men and women come to the job for the same reasons. Moreover, when men and women describe what they bring to the work, they describe the same things – dedication, expertise, energy, etc. These two similarities help men and women recognize that in the workplace they are bringing their professionalism as well as their perspectives. These facts immediately create common ground on which the discussion of gender can begin.

While women have not been able to change organizations on their own, they have received an unexpected benefit from the lack of legal imperative. With no legal imperative, leaders must respond to a moral call to do the right thing or political forces from member countries who are leaders in equity issues. In either case, promotion and hiring of women are seen as being done on the basis of merit.

The extreme culture mix of international organizations is complex and leads to more opportunities for women to be misunderstood. Moreover, in international organizations where the cultures of the individuals come from every point of the globe, the behaviors of individuals vary substantially. For example, a woman may find herself in a highly discriminatory environment led by someone from a country where women are considered property. Women must be aware of the impact of having many cultures in the workplace. It will not be the same as their home culture. Recognizing this helps women prepare for the intentions behind actions and so develop appropriate and effective strategies. For example, conflict avoidance serves no woman. Women must learn how to raise issues effectively. This can be learned through mentors. Women must also be aware of their role and obligation to each other. Rank and gender reinforce discriminatory behaviors. Women have learned to treat other women the way men treat women. Like their male colleagues, women must learn that their behaviors can be damaging.

The definition of harassment will take time to evolve. Sexual harassment is perceived differently depending on culture and gender. However, as is pointed out in the section on respect, treating someone with respect limits behavior options by eliminating arrogant, judgmental, denigrating, and bawdy behaviors. If everyone is treated with respect, sexual harassment will be eliminated.

Promotion is primarily in the hands of managers, and women have been offered fewer promotions. Yet when the manager's reputation is on the line and the job absolutely must be done well because of time constraints or high exposure, managers more often call upon their female staff to do it.

Travel requirements in international organizations place additional burdens on women because of their role in family care. Family needs are confused with lack of commitment to the work. Men must

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recognize that the dedication of women which they accept is inconsistent with the impression of lack of commitment simply because men see women also attending to family matters.

Respectful behavior is the key to long term change. Women and men in the workplace describe respectful behaviors as those that suggest that the person is being listened to, being recognized as a professional, being treated with courtesy, and being trusted. Respect becomes the common denominator of changing the environment to one of nondiscrimination. With reason, these characteristics are reflected in the principles of the Practice Model as part of creating trust.

Effective research for organizations resembles feminist research. For example, the self-reflexive nature of feminist research is essential when the participants in the research need to change their own understanding before they are able to change the organization. The Practice Model is based on principles that build this type of self-reflexive environment for the core group.

Although Omega is hierarchical in nature, the pursuit of intellectual excellence allowed them to embrace the principles of the Practice Model as they appeared to allow for the highest excellence of results. As a result, every member of the core group and later the organization accepted the conclusions of the core group. TDI, where relative power was more important, was not successful in creating the container they needed to build unanimity. Having a strong executive in the group exacerbated the use of power by rank and ultimately led to a weaker solution.

Chapter 7 offers a list of questions that this project could only raise. Each question suggests next steps that might be pursued. The most important are the definitions of the roles of women in society and the inadequacy these definitions present to the roles that women must play in the workplace where power and its attendant behaviors are called for as a natural part of the role. Perhaps this new role is being defined in the thousands of interactions between women and men in the workplace. But can it be done in anything other than the whole of society?

