Advancing Gender Reform in Large-scale Organisations: A New Approach for Practitioners and Researchers

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Abstract

Gender is now understood as an inbuilt feature of organisations, and gender equity strategies need to consider organisational processes as a key issue. Researchers lack, however, an effective common framework for understanding them. An approach is suggested, used in a recent study of gender patterns in a group of Australian public sector organisations. This study was based on a multi-dimensional theory of gender relations. The concept of an organisational gender regime is defined, and a four-dimensional model for analysing gender regimes is outlined. Details of the research are given, including a method for documenting and describing the gender regimes of particular worksites, and a strategy of careful and collaborative analysis. Practical suggestions are made for organisations undertaking their own gender research, emphasising a conceptual and collaborative approach to organisational gender research.

Introduction: Gender in Organisations

It is now familiar, both in organisation studies and gender studies, that organisations are the bearers of gender relations (Mills and Tancredo 1992). Acker (1990) famously argued this in her theory of "gendered organisations", and Burton (1987) demonstrated it from another perspective in analysing the "mobilisation of masculine bias". As Stivers (2002) has shown, the US administrative state, though using women's labour and shaped by women's reform politics, historically excluded women from authority. This is a very common pattern in large-scale organisations, in the private, as well as in the public, sector.

Organisations are not gender-neutral structures in which gender is simply a property of the individuals who appear in organisational slots. Organisations themselves institutionalise definitions of femininity and masculinity, arrange gender hierarchies, construct gendered cultures, and define gender-appropriate jobs.

Striking examples of gendered occupational cultures were described in organisational research in the 1980s. Cockburn's justly celebrated *Brothers* (1983) studied printing shops and showed how the

exclusion of women from skilled work in this industry was connected to a masculine occupational culture, itself connected with a particular technology. As the labour process changed, however, this definition of masculinity was increasingly disrupted, and men's monopoly of employment became increasingly difficult to sustain. Pringle (1988), by contrast, studied a feminised occupation, the office secretary. She found a labour process and structure of supervision that were deeply interwoven with conceptions of gender (the "office wife" to a putatively male boss), and indeed with sexuality (e.g. maintenance of "attractiveness" becoming effectively part of the job, strongly emphasised in training).

More recent organisational research includes other settings with a sharp gender division of labor. For instance Ogasawara's *Office Ladies and Salaried Men* (1998) studied Japanese firms where a hierarchical gender division of labor was almost absolute, only the men having managerial careers, and all the women being in service roles. Yet even in such a setting there were complexities, with the women having means of resistance to the men's authority, making tactical use of the male managers' dependence on their services and goodwill. Other research, such as Orton's *Beyond Hierarchy* (1996), has looked at "flatter" organisations, and finds that gender hierarchies – and resistance to them – still appear, though in less stark forms.

The complexity of gender patterns in organisations is increasingly documented. Barrett (1996), in an illuminating study of the US Navy, has shown how different versions of hegemonic masculinity are defined in three different sectors of that organisation (aviation, surface ships, and supply). Mac an Ghaill (1994), in an exceptionally detailed study of a secondary school in the UK, has shown not only the multiple constructions of masculinity in that setting, but how these are connected to patterns of sexuality, and to the organisational routines of daily life for different groups of participants. The interplay between gender relations and patterns of class, ethnicity and age, often theorized as the intersectionality of structures, is part of this complexity. Wajcman (1999), in a study of managers in high-technology companies, has shown the contradictory situation created for women. Despite equal opportunity measures which allows them entry to management, the unaltered definition of managerial work and the structural constraints

under which it is done mean that the women are obliged to conform to a traditionally masculine way of life – with profound implications for relationships, homes, and conceptions of self.

These studies have used a mixture of social research methods. The most prominent are: participant observation, where the researcher spends time in the organisation and becomes part of its everyday life; interviewing, ranging from highly structured to almost unstructured, sometimes with a life-history focus and sometimes focussed on the current situation; and documentary analysis, especially where the history of the organisation is an important issue.

With this range of methods, researchers have produced a wealth of insightful observations. It remains true, however, that it is difficult to compare their studies at all systematically, and thus make the field of gendered organisation studies fully cumulative. And this may contribute to the continuing problem that "mainstream" organisational research still, very often, ignores gender as a feature of the organisations being studied. This is strikingly true of research on new forms of management, despite the efforts of researchers such as Yeatman (1990) and Wajcman (1999).

Yet there is a growing need for appraisal and comparison of gender patterns. The "mainstreaming" of gender equity in the 1990s (Mackay and Bilton 2000) has put gender issues on the desks of all managers, though there is often little guidance about how to understand and deal with them. Assessing the impact of gender reform policies also requires a way of comparing the state of play in gender arrangements. Ingenious means for doing this exist at the level of national gender reform (Valdés 2001). Since most reform action occurs in specific organisations, there is a great need to make appraisals at the level of the organization. At present, organisations tend to use a "checklist" approach, using simple and abstract measures, and often the whole task is handed to a consultant.

This paper proposes a less technocratic and more systematic way of appraising gender in organisations, based on the concept of an organisational gender regime and a collaborative approach to organisational research. To give the presentation a practical basis, the paper discusses the methods of a recent study of public sector organisations in New South Wales, Australia. The paper ends with suggestions about

how organisations can make such studies of themselves.

The "Gender Equity in Public Institutions" (GEPI) Programme

The GEPI project was launched after discussions in the NSW public sector had questioned why the equal opportunity and anti-discrimination reform process initiated some twenty years before had had only limited success in improving women's participation in public sector decision-making.

The project was funded by the Australian Research Council, under its Strategic Projects in Industry Research and Training (now "Linkage") grant programme. This is a national competitive granting scheme, which supports collaborative research between universities and industry partners. The principal Industry Partner was the Premier's Department. Funding also came from two NSW public sector agencies, and "in-kind" contributions, mainly in the form of staff time, were made by seven NSW public sector agencies and three faculties of the University of Sydney. Two other central agencies were involved, together with four line agencies, which cannot be named because of confidentiality agreements.

The ARC's SPIRT/Linkage program supports projects which are developed and conducted cooperatively; the model is different from that of conventional "commissioned" research. The project designated Partner Investigators from all agencies involved. It was one of the long-term purposes of the project to share research skills and help develop methods by which public sector agencies can examine themselves with respect to gender issues and develop their own capacities for research and reflection.

The complexity of organisations, and the complex character of the gender system, meant that a single research strategy would be inadequate for this problem. The programme as a whole had a "discovery" approach. The broad facts of gender inequality were already known – that was why the program was set up. Everyone in the gender equity field was familiar with the Equal Opportunity machinery, and knew some reasons why its effects were limited (Donaghy 2003; Sawer 2002; Summers 2004). We hoped to generate new ideas, both about how gender inequalities were produced, and about what could be done to

change them. We designed the project to maximise the chances of new insights emerging, and to gain cross-bearings from different methods.

Accordingly the GEPI program was designed as a suite of studies, using a combination of research methods, examining a diversity of sites and events, and studying different aspects of organisational functioning. Hopefully, the conclusions would not be – as so many academic studies are – dependent on generalising from a single case or a single method. In fact our initial design was over-ambitious; in the event, four studies were undertaken. Study 1 examined the gender division of labour in public sector employment, using four statistical databases. Study 2 examined gender relations and processes in specific public sector workplaces by interview and observational methods. Study 3 examined gender relations and processes in specific policy formation processes (See Schofield and Goodwin in this issue). Study 4 examined gender equity "successes" in specific organisational sites.

The project itself involved a significant organisational effort. It was managed by a Steering Committee, including all Partner Investigators and the University staff, and other public sector staff involved with the project. Individual Partner Investigators had carriage of the project in their agencies, e.g. the selection of sites, negotiation with agency management, etc. As the GEPI programme developed, it became clear that it would be useful to have Working Parties for specific studies. These included the representatives of the agencies concerned and the university researchers working on the particular study. In total three university staff and seventeen public sector staff were involved in the management of the project. The project employed at various times five full-time and part-time research staff, who were responsible for most of the fieldwork and some of the writing-up of cases. They were employed by the University of Sydney and worked mainly from offices at the university, where the project administration and records were located.

The GEPI program expected to gain benefits from cross-bearings on the problems of gender inequality, and we were confident that we could get cross-bearings from studies using different methods because they had a common intellectual frame. This was, broadly, a "gender relations" approach to questions of gender equity (Schofield 2004). The old approach to gender policy, that simply focused on the situa-

tion of women, is long past its use-by date. Expanding that approach by simply adding parallel policies on men, or parallel studies of men, would return us to a categorical model of gender that was out of date in the 1980s. The key to a more sophisticated understanding of gender inequalities is to look at the *relations* between categories and between groups – relations that are constantly being produced, renewed, and changed in organisational processes.

The Concept of "Gender Regime"

The gender relations approach is based on an understanding of gender as a structure of social relations (Connell 2002; Walby 1997), which may alternatively be seen as a social institution (Lorber 1994). Personal identities, patterns of gendered embodiment, intimate relationships – the "close-up" experiential issues that are the usual content of discussions about gender – are constituted *within* the structure of gender relations. This structure *always* involves men as well as women, and includes different forms of masculinity and femininity. In a relational approach to gender, there is no problem about "adding men in" – men, and issues about masculinity, are there from the start.

By the "gender regime" of an institution we mean the patterning of gender relations in that institution, and especially the continuing pattern, which provides the structural context of particular relationships and individual practices. The same definition applies to the gender regime of a particular site within an institution. As Schofield and Goodwin show in the following paper, the concept of "gender regime" can be applied in a parallel way to an organisational *process* such as policy formation, as well as to organisational structure.

A local gender regime is likely to share many features with the gender order of the wider society, but may depart from it in specific ways – and in some circumstances may even reverse widespread patterns. For instance, the public sector in Australia has a higher proportion of women in its workforce than the larger private sector, and a higher proportion of women in senior management. Such anomalies are potentially important as sources of social change. (Similarly, a particular site may depart from the broad patterns of the institution that contains it.)

Gender is multidimensional. This is a crucially important conclu-

sion of the developing social science of gender over the last thirty years. Economic processes, authority, violence, discourses and ideologies, sexuality and emotional connections, are all part of the picture of gender relations – no one of them determines all the others.

The gender regime of an institution therefore involves all the dimensions of gender relations, no matter what the institution is or does. The distinction between "dimensions" is a conceptual tool; they are found interwoven in actual relationships and transactions. Nevertheless they provide an essential framework for systematic research and comparison.

In the model used here (Connell 2002: 53-68), four dimensions are distinguished:

- *gender division of labour*, i.e. the way in which production and consumption are arranged on gender lines, including the gendering of occupations, the division between paid work and domestic labour, etc.
- *gender relations of power*, i.e. the way in which control, authority, and force are exercised on gender lines, including organisational hierarchy, legal power, collective and individual violence;
- *emotion and human relations*, i.e. the way attachment and antagonism among people and groups are organized along gender lines, including feelings of solidarity, prejudice and disdain, sexual attraction and repulsion, etc.
- *gender culture and symbolism*, i.e. the way gender identities are defined in culture, the language and symbols of gender difference, the prevailing beliefs and attitudes about gender.

This fourfold model provides a template for analysing any gender regime, whether in organisational structure or organisational process (see Appendix, Part B). For both purposes, this model can also provide a framework for data collection in interviews and observation.

The empirical task, in studying any gender regime, is to collect information that allows a characterisation of the state of play, i.e. the current relations and practices, on each of these dimensions simultaneously. This is, in effect, an exercise in contemporary history. One seeks not just an abstract measure of performance on each dimension, but an understanding of how a specific configuration of relationships was produced, and currently works as organisational reality. To provide a

concrete example of how this can be done, I now turn to the methods of the GEPI Worksites study.

The GEPI Worksites Study: Assumptions and Design

Study 2 in the GEPI programme (henceforth the Worksites study) addressed gender relations and processes in specific public sector workplaces. This paper is concerned with its methods, not with its detailed findings. Those are reported elsewhere, in papers concerned with work/life balance, organisational gender regimes, the dynamics of change, and experiences of gender reform programmes (Connell 2005; Connell forthcoming a, b, c).

The Worksites study involved five public sector organisations. They included "central" and "line" agencies, covered a variety of industries and governmental functions, and varied markedly in size. In each agency two contrasting sites were chosen: one concerned with central administration or policymaking; the other more directly concerned with operations, with the delivery of the agency's services on the ground. This was not intended as a random or representative sample of the public sector. It was a purposive sample of sites, deliberately constructed to achieve specific kinds of diversity.

Though this was not part of the research plan, the sites also differed in internal organisation and scale. Some are fairly homogeneous, others are internally diversified. Some have strongly marked and long-established boundaries between sub-units, others have shifting boundaries and flexible groupings of staff.

The background assumption of the Worksites study was that women's participation in decision-making in the public realm – the ultimate concern of the GEPI program as a whole – is to some extent shaped by the routine patterns of gender practice and gender relations within public sector institutions. To develop more effective strategies for increasing women's participation, then, it is useful to understand the everyday realities of gender relations.

A second guiding idea was that these realities are not fully visible "from above", via the kind of information about organisations normally available to senior management, or to central agencies concerned with gender equity (e.g. agency statistical reports to the Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment). Broad trends

visible in such data may conceal many local differences, and are open to very speculative interpretation. Though they will show *what* broad gender effects are to be found, they may not throw much light on *how* gender effects are produced. For this, a close-focus examination of particular worksites is essential.

A third guiding idea was that participation in decision-making is only one dimension of gender relations. To understand the conditions in organisations that might affect participation, we have to look at the other dimensions of gender too: for instance, cultural assumptions about femininity and masculinity, or existing gendered patterns of loyalty, trust or antagonism. It is therefore important to gain as comprehensive a picture of local gender relations as possible.

This reasoning led to a research design based on organisational ethnography. The study was intended to go deep, producing detailed and multi-dimensional accounts of gender relations. Its design therefore was based on a set of case studies, each intended to describe the gender regime of a specific worksite in one of the participating agencies.

Though some organisational patterns are widespread in the public sector (e.g. a common scale of levels of appointment, a distinction between managers and managed), the precise patterns of supervision, and the arrangements of sub-units, are almost infinitely varied. Many variations on organisational themes develop as local solutions to problems of staffing, labour process and supervision are reached, tried, and modified – and then may have to be undertaken again in a restructure. It became clear in the course of the research that this "localness" of public sector organisation was relevant to the shaping of gender relations.

Fieldwork

The main sources of data for the study were face-to-face interviews, conducted at each of the ten sites. In two sites, a period of participant observation preceded the interviews. The fieldwork was done over an eighteen-month period, governed by the project's resources and the agencies' calendars.

The study used a focussed interview technique, where each interview covers a pre-determined set of topics, with flexibility for the

interviewer to adapt order and wording to the circumstances of each interview, and to follow up issues raised by each individual participant. This procedure allows a systematic comparison of responses, while also allowing new themes to emerge. Thus the research remains open to unanticipated information and experiences contributed by participants.

Interviewers followed a set of topics that had been discussed and agreed in the project's working party, which included representatives of the participating agencies. We asked, for instance, for descriptions of the current division of labour in the worksite (and thus got multiple accounts of the same division of labour from a number of participants). We asked how tasks arose, how decisions were made, and about respondents' involvement in interactions with other parts of the organisation. We asked about respondents' careers, and thus got a view of their experience of other organisations and their gender issues. A range of other issues was also included in the interviews. The topics covered broadly correspond to topics 3-17 of the site report template in the Appendix to this paper.

Most interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. They were done privately, sometimes in participants' offices, sometimes in other spaces (e.g. a lunchroom, a committee room) available at the worksite. With the agreement of the respondents, interviews were tape-recorded for transcription. In the rare cases where a respondent was not willing to go on tape, notes were taken (with permission) by the interviewer.

Before interviews began, the purposes of the project were explained, confidentiality was guaranteed, and informed consent to the research procedure was given. Though some participants were, understandably, guarded in what they said, many were remarkably free and revealing. Overall, the fieldworkers were impressed by the willingness of respondents to contribute their experiences, whether pleasing or painful, and to trust the researchers. We hope to have repaid this trust.

In two sites, a researcher spent approximately three weeks (14 working days at one site, 15 at the other) as a participant observer. This involved unstructured time in the worksite, plus attendance at a variety of meetings involving staff of the site, sometimes at other places. The field worker was familiar with the design of the Worksites study, and

had a broad brief to observe the labour process, interactions, transactions between the site and other public sector units, etc. Field notes were made at the end of each day of participant observation, and were later typed for analysis.

Analysis of the Data: Characterizing Configurations of Gender Relations

Though accounts of method often end with a description of field procedures, the way data are handled and interpreted is just as important. For the Worksites study, the taped interviews were transcribed by an experienced confidential typist familiar with this kind of research work. Each interview was then summarised and indexed by one of the project staff, following an indexing plan based on (but extending beyond) the interview schedule mentioned above. The same indexing plan was applied to the field notes from the participant observation.

For each of the ten sites, a confidential site report was then written, based on the indexing process but with reference back to the raw transcripts. In these reports, an attempt was made both to summarise systematically, and to illustrate with particular statements, the evidence provided by our respondents. The site reports followed a standard pattern, again linked to the initial interview agenda and to the indexing plan. This allowed a systematic comparison of how specific gender issues were configured in the specific sites. The analytic template on which the site reports were written is given in the Appendix to this paper.

The draft site reports were discussed with representatives of the agencies concerned, to correct errors of fact and interpretation, and then circulated to all members of the working party. They were then workshopped, page by page and point by point, in working party meetings. In these meetings, comparisons across sites began to emerge. Points raised in these meetings were noted for inclusion in the overall study report.

This step-by-step process was intended to achieve depth of understanding of each particular case while also providing a basis for comparison and possible generalisation. Systematic indexing and a standard reporting format provided controls against the familiar tendency in qualitative research to focus on striking anecdotes. At the same time,

direct quotation from a wide range of respondents connected reports to the experience and language of public sector workers.

Most importantly, the process – laborious as it was, perhaps because it was laborious – was able to pool the organisational know-how of the public sector participants with the research know-how of the academic participants, in developing our understanding both of specific sites and of general themes.

Confidentiality agreements prevent our presenting any actual site reports here. The risk in presenting only the analytic framework is to suggest that a gender regime is only a set of abstract dimensions. But each gender regime is a distinctive, functioning organisational reality. Changes in the division of labour may affect the structure of authority, the pattern of emotional relationships may undermine management strategies, and so forth. Any site is likely to show gaps and divisions, perhaps contradictions, in its current gender arrangements, and these too have to be explored. For these purposes it was important that we had interviews with much information about the recent history of each organisation, as well as its current reality.

Writing a site report – which might more generally be called a "gender regime report" – is an attempt to grasp the *gestalt* of gender relations as a moment in organisational history. It is not a mechanical task: it calls into play the analyst's capacity to understand the relationships between different social processes, and also her capacity to understand the human experience of organisational change. These are challenges that the best organisational studies, mentioned above in the Introduction, have met. The task in contemporary organisational research is to do regularly what used to be exceptional – to understand and illuminate distinctive patterns in organisational life.

At the same time, a gender regime report is definitely not a free-form literary composition. As the GEPI template in the Appendix illustrates, it must follow a definite conceptual agenda. It has to characterise the state of play in each of the dimensions of gender relations, and attempt to specify the local agendas and dynamics of change. This is what makes it possible to do systematic comparisons across sites, and makes it possible to use a set of gender regime reports to build up characterisations of gender processes in the organisation, or the sector, as a whole. That is the kind of understanding needed for new thinking

about policy.

Reflection: Seeing Gender in Organizational Contexts

As part of the discussion of method it is useful to reflect on how gender issues are "seen" in organisational contexts.

In statistical work, such as the data compilations about the public sector workforce used in GEPI Study 1, gender seems quite obvious. All individuals are classified as either male or female, and gender is the margin of difference between the two groups. This is often a politically effective way of understanding issues, for instance the under-representation of women in the Senior Executive Service, or as CEOs of private sector organizations (as in the managerial "Census", EOWA 2002).

Yet this is a seriously limited way of "seeing" gender, as Schofield (2004) emphasises. Obviously it ignores intersex groups, which amount to between 1 and 2 per cent of the population. More broadly, it ignores the meanings that male and female statuses have for their incumbents, and it focusses on the categories rather than on the transactions or practices that link them. Where there is no noticeable margin of statistical difference, "gender" seems to vanish.

Alternatively, gender can be seen in an emblematic way. Conspicuous individuals or events can come to stand for a group or a process. For instance, when one or a few women get into senior management positions, people in the organisation can believe that gender equity has been accomplished: "look", they may say, "there is no glass ceiling here any more!" Or when a few men are known to cook and to be interested in babies: "look, men have changed their ways!" Or when a debatable sex-based harassment case occurs, the mechanism itself is denounced as oppressive or unfair.

In the Worksites study we came across many examples of such emblematic reasoning. We also came across interesting mechanisms for *not* seeing gender, or for distancing gender. One of these was the formula by which gender problems were "out there" but not "in here". They were located back in another era, or over in another agency, or only in the private sector, or only in private life. Another interesting mechanism was the formula of gender denial – gender differences shouldn't matter, so gender differences don't matter. To name them is

to call them into existence. On this view, if one treats everyone as an individual, gender equity is accomplished. In this super-individualist discourse, one talks gender equity into existence, by talking structures, economies and cultures out of existence.

The belief that there is no "glass ceiling" is compatible with that super-individualism, but it may also reflect the complexity of gender inequalities. Arguably, there is no one glass ceiling because there are many. That is to say, there may be various points in any organisation where access becomes more difficult because of gender dynamics. Those points may exist for varying reasons – because of training requirements, work/home issues, existing organisational networks, patterns of mentoring, cultural definitions of gender, etc. There is no single barrier to focus on.

This organisational complexity of gender inclusion and exclusion will become visible only if we can "see" gender as multidimensional, as involving a variety of different kinds of relationships and processes. The case studies in this project demonstrate how important it is to see gender that way. But to see gender as multidimensional means that we cannot easily represent gender equity issues as pie charts in a PowerPoint presentation – so something may be lost in public impact that is gained in understanding.

Advice to Organisations Wanting to Study Their Own Gender Regimes

The GEPI project is not an ideal model for all kinds of organisational research. It was large, expensive and administratively complex. Organisations concerned to examine their own gender arrangements need methods that are quick, straightforward, and not too expensive.

Nevertheless the experience of GEPI, and the Worksites study specifically, offer a number of lessons about how the job can done effectively.

(a) The GEPI program was set up as a collaboration between academic and public sector people. The collaboration did not always work smoothly, given different agendas, pressures and backgrounds; nor was there always agreement among the public sector participants, nor among the professional researchers. Yet the benefits of the collaboration, in the long run, outweighed all difficulties. In the Worksites study,

especially as we got to the data interpretation stage, insider knowledge combined effectively with outsider perspectives to produce analyses that would have been very hard for either party to generate alone.

Accordingly we would recommend to organisations wishing to study their own gender regimes, to find ways of including both outsider and insider perspectives in the process. Having full-time researchers is the most expensive way of getting the outsiders, and risks reversion to a "commissioned research" model (see below). But there are other ways of getting outsider participation. For instance the project might include part-time research advisers, knowledgeable people from the unions concerned, or a reciprocal arrangement with another organisation that is doing the same thing. (Arranging such collaborations might be a significant task for gender equity agencies.) Practical lore is available on how groups undertaking self-study can use outsider expertise (Wadsworth 1983).

(b) The GEPI program drew at many points on available data, both statistical and documentary (e.g. ODEOPE 1999). There is no need to re-invent the wheel, and organisations often have a lot of information about themselves already stored. The problem is to access and use it.

For instance, many organisations hold considerable information about their own gender division of labour. This may be in the form of surveys for equal opportunity reporting, or payroll or personnel records; in some cases even Census data may be relevant. It may be possible, with due care for confidentiality, to get very important information about the organisation by simple cross-classification of gender categories with occupation, salary, employment status (e.g. part-time / full-time), and organisational level. More refined analyses, cross-classifying these categories and including age, ethnicity, etc., as indicated by studies of intersectionality, may also be possible if a statistician is on hand (see Appendix, point 8).

(c) The model on which the GEPI research was based laid stress on the multi-dimensionality of gender. This was fully vindicated in practice. There was no worksite, and no policy process, in which we failed empirically to find data related to each of the four dimensions of gender in the model. Certainly the four-dimensional model is not the only possible conceptual model for gender analysis. But whatever

model is adopted, it is important to recognise, and try to map, the different facets of gender processes.

For instance, a simple statistical account of the gender division of labour will not tell us what we need to know about gendered authority in an organisation. Resources, networks, cliques, legal powers, coercion, insider knowledge, and capacity to mobilise support, must also be considered (see Appendix, point 9). Nor will the facts about the gender division of labour, by themselves, tell us how the staff of the organisation understand the local gender arrangements, or gender equity policies. Whether these arrangements and policies are thought legitimate or unfair, fixed or fluid, consistent or inconsistent, must be established directly, and not assumed (see Appendix, point 11).

(d) The academic / public sector collaboration in the GEPI program was not just a matter of working together in producing the fieldwork and the analyses. It was also a matter of *thinking* together, setting up forums (i.e. the working parties of different studies) for debate and interpretation.

Organisations wishing to study their own gender regimes will need to think about creating the right forums for discussing their research. Such forums may not look very much like the GEPI ones, since they are likely to involve different sets of participants. But the GEPI project suggests a very important reason why such forums need to have some organisational autonomy, and should be places where any view can be freely expressed. Most organisations (including all public sector organisations) have an official "line" on gender equity – which includes the idea that they conform in all respects to gender equity legislation, and to management, board or government definitions of gender equity purposes. It is absolutely essential, in a research process, to be able to recognise and discuss, without excuses or defensiveness, ways in which an organisation does *not* conform to what it officially should be. Recognising such issues may indeed be the key to organisational change.

(e) The GEPI program, as already mentioned, had a "discovery" approach. We wanted to generate new information and new ideas, both about what was currently happening, and about what could be done to promote change.

This approach had a cost. It meant that the methods of the project were less predetermined, less apparently rigorous, than the methods of

commissioned research with which many managers are more familiar. The project, for instance, did not have pre-specified "deliverables", since it relied on the design evolving in the course of collaboration among the partners.

Organisations wanting to generate new *understandings* of their gender arrangements should beware of relying on over-formal research methods. (Sending round a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, for instance, may appear rigorous and quantitative, but can be quite inappropriate for gathering information about important and sensitive aspects of gender relations.) *Quality* of information and understanding is likely to be more important than having masses of data. Getting cross-bearings by using a variety of methods is an old research strategy, and still a good one. These are not recipes for producing quick results. But organisations wishing to research their own gender regimes need to take the project seriously – it is not the easiest of tasks – and commit the time and resources needed.

Conclusion

The design of the GEPI programme arose from a particular situation and we do not propose it as a direct model for other studies. But the underlying approach, and some of the specific techniques, do have wider relevance.

Among the features of our approach that we think well supported by our field experience, and likely to be useful in other situations, two stand out.

The first is the use of a conceptual tool, based on systematic gender theory, throughout the study. This is the concept of an organisational gender regime, based on a multidimensional model of gender relations. This conceptual tool points to the functioning of the whole organisation, rather than specific policies or measures, as the locus of gender change and reform. The use of this conceptual tool made both data collection and data analysis systematic. Producing standardised gender regime reports made possible detailed comparisons across sites, and generalisations about processes that operated across different sites. As the following paper by Schofield and Goodwin shows, the conceptual tool was capable of development, in the course of the study, to deal with policymaking processes as well as organisational structures.

The second feature we would emphasise is the strategy of collaborative research, involving staff of the organisations being studied in the research process itself. We do not pretend that this was easy – a technocratic, top-down research process would certainly have been easier to manage. But the fact that the project was open, from the planning stage to final reporting, to the ideas and criticisms of a range of people with practical experience of the organisations being studied, made for realism and relevance. A collaborative research approach, when it works well, can link up with a participatory approach to gender reform and thus build on democratic impulses already at work in the organisation.

Producing the next generation of gender equity policies is not a light task. Under current neo-liberal political regimes, with "backlash" outbreaks from time to time, the climate in much of the world is unfavourable to gender reform. Yet gender justice remains a living principle, and continues to attract widespread support – both in the public sector organisations we studied, and in the wider society. Organisational researchers can have a significant part to play in realising this principle, given determination, creativity and effective partnerships.

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Appendix

Template for Standard Site Report, GEPI Worksites Study

1. Introductory note (status, confidentiality of report)
2. Data and method

PART A: THE UNIT

3. Major tasks, functions
4. Location in parent organization and relations with other units
5. Internal organization
6. Finance and staffing
7. Labour process

PART B: THE SITE'S INTERNAL GENDER REGIME

8. Division of labour
9. Authority and power
10. Affect, emotion and human relations
11. Gender symbolism and ideology

C. RELATION TO THE WIDER GENDER ORDER

12. Within the public sector
13. Work/home issues
14. The gender order in society

D. GENDER DYNAMICS

15. Problems and conflicts
16. Reform agendas
17. The making and unmaking of gender

E. LESSONS FOR THE STUDY

18. Emerging themes
19. The research process