

# Women in OD

Shared experiences of learning group members

March 2011

Do women experience OD consultancy differently to men? Do they get different opportunities and face different challenges? Participants at our recent Nairobi meeting were interested to discuss these issues. This month four female OD consultants from Africa and Asia have shared their experiences. These can be found in full on ... blogs. We have highlighted some of the common themes here. Do they resonate with you? Are your experiences different? Are these less about gender and more about power generally? Let us know what you think.

In daring to write about gender issues, there is the grave danger of stereotyping. Obviously not all men and women are the same. There is considerable diversity within genders. All people are a complex mixture of so-called masculine and feminine traits. We must therefore approach this issue with great care and avoid generalising. This paper shares individuals' experiences – this is how it has been for these women. It does not say this is how it always is for all women.

According to academic research, women might have particular advantages when it comes to being an OD consultant. After all, OD is a people-centred participatory approach to change. Research on women in leadership has found evidence that women in leadership tend to: Operate more collaborative. Women in leadership tend to adopt a more democratic or participative style (Eagly and Johnson 1990), wanting to share power. They have a preference for flatter, interwoven structures, and being team players. They operate within webs of relationships and networks (Helgesen 1995), sharing information, not keeping it to themselves. Use interpersonal skills and personality to inspire their followers or employees (Rosener 1990) Be able to better read people and deal with emotions. They are more able to draw alongside people and empathise than men (Simon Baron-Cohen 2004). Think more long-term, and are better at strategic thinking (Ward 2008).

All these are good qualities of OD consultants. But does this theory look like and feel like in reality? This month four learning group members Priya, Betsy, Joyce and Doreen have shared what the reality looks like to them. They highlight a number of specific opportunities that being a woman in OD has given them:

**Affinity and confidences**

In seeking to understand and read organisations, some found that staff had an affinity and confided in them more than if they had been a man. One said:

The 'mother' in me works as strength in that clients can easily confide in me. I have a big ear for the unsaid. There are occasions when I support an organisation whose staff are deeply hurt and unwilling to share information. They start to open up to me.

Another added:

In some situations such as training in Catholic institutions, women participants welcomed a female resource person, expressing a sense of affinity and feminine bonding. For some it was an opportunity to build a personal relationship, confide inner struggles or share their hopes and fears. In some training programs participants who are shy and quiet may find a female resource person more approachable and less threatening than a male.

When pregnant she found that there was an even stronger bond:

During pregnancy, I was often overwhelmed by the care and loving concern of people in the organisations we worked for. I discovered that the experiences of motherhood brings women on a common platform and facilitates an instinctive bonding. It seemed that women speak a common language.

### **See life from a female perspective**

A number of respondents highlighted that as a women they were able to hear the quieter female voice amongst staff and also amongst beneficiaries:

While women do not necessarily have a different perspective from men, their life experiences help them to become more sensitive to people's inner needs and at times provide insight into people's behaviour.

Since many voluntary organizations work with women target groups and have many female staff, the role of a woman as consultant becomes especially significant.

In a tribal village of Chattisgarh I had opportunity to interact with 70-year-old midwives, who had rarely spoken to anyone outside their village. Another time I watched while a young mother, whose husband had recently died of HIV, tied her one-year-old child to a cot, so that she could sell vegetables from door to door and earn a living. Some of these experiences helped me to gain a unique perspective of women's vulnerability as well as their inner strength. It also helped me to take special pride in being a woman and explore my inner potential.

### **Ability to read emotional aspects to change**

Another pointed out that as a woman she felt better able to read and empathise with the emotional aspects to change. She said:

Consultants have to work with both head and heart. Organisations are living entities just as the people who work there are. Organisational issues can be understood better when we understand the people who are affected by the problem. It is not just another job.

### **Sense of responsibility and passion**

The four respondents each spoke about the sense of responsibility and passion that they brought to their work, leading to longer-term relationships with clients. They believed this to be a particular feminine characteristic.

Women have a sense of sharing responsibility and power which can contribute much to organisational growth and development. The excitement of reaching out to people and institutions consumes me. I realised that this opportunity to learn and contribute to people's lives was not just 'work' but a God-given privilege.

I strongly believe from my own experience that women are more passionate about OD interventions they facilitate. Personally, am very passionate about facilitating change processes. No matter how small the change may be, I get so much satisfaction.

Working with organisations has gained me long lasting relationships. I continue getting feedback from the clients on progress long after the end of an assignment. In the process they may request for advice. My colleagues tell me that offering free advice is not be good for business, but at least the support given is more consistent and easy to monitor change.

But as well as these opportunities, they all felt that being a woman in OD posed considerable challenges.

### **Male prejudice in clients**

Some organisations have male leaders who look down on women. One respondent said she had:

Experiences of more conservative male groups who resent being 'taught' by a woman, especially one who is younger than them.

Another related:

I remember one of my first interventions where I was facilitating. I was just 28 and working with male farmers, who were mostly retired from government. These men kept

asking whether there were other OD practitioners from our office. Without knowing the intent of their questions, I responded innocently, that there were other facilitators but they were not coming. During tea break, one of the men came to me to confess that he looked down on me because I was young and a woman.

Churches and Christian organisations may be particularly prone to the 'stained glass ceiling'. The leadership of such organisations tends to be still male-dominated. They may listen less attentively when women are speaking. And even where the leadership is female, this can also pose problems for women OD consultants. Women leaders may feel threatened by other women who are there to help. At times they may resort to tactics reminiscent of queen bees.

### **Under-confident**

Research 'in a variety of contexts show that men overestimate their abilities and women underestimate them' (Ward 2008). As one writer observes: 'I often find that it takes women ten years longer than men to realise how good they really are' (Helgesen 1995). Women are thought to be particularly prone to the 'imposter syndrome' which is the suspicion that we are not as good as everyone thinks we are, that our successes may have been accidental, and that consequently we may not be entirely sure how to repeat them.

The women respondents certainly felt:

the pressure to live up to your potential in different work situations. This is a struggle, particularly in male-dominated cultures. Developing professional expertise is a battle and gained gradually with experience and hard work.

Some women feel that clients might not be expecting to pay market consulting rates to them because they were assumed not to be the main breadwinner.

In some cases OD is still seen to be a male-preserve, not something for women to do.

A young woman came up to me at a conference recently and said 'I am encouraged to see you as an OD consultant. Now I know that even women can do OD, it is not for men only. I will work towards becoming one too.

### **Over-responsible**

Some of the respondents felt that their innate strengths as a women could at times be weaknesses. Sometimes they over-empathised with clients, making it hard to push for painful decisions:

I struggle not to incline to the heart. As a mother I spend a lot of time settling conflicts among family members and ensuring a win-win solutions. It is not so with

organisations, sometimes hard unpopular recommendations are made in the interest of the organisation.

Others found it difficult to walk away from clients leaving them with the complete responsibility for implementing change. They wanted to go the extra mile and give them on-going support.

### **Travel away from home**

Respondents found that travelling posed particular issues for women. At the most obvious level there is a risk factor:

On one occasion I walked for six days to reach a remote village in Nepal for an evaluation. Other times I had to travel alone in villages of Bihar, Jharkhand and South India. For a woman, travelling alone has its risks and adds to one's vulnerability.

But respondents found the challenge of being a mother and wife away from home even more challenging. Fathers and husbands may face similar issues, but perhaps not exactly the same in most cultures. Two respondents shared profoundly personal and painful stories:

I am constantly away from home for most of the times. This has also put stress on my married life. At times I don't feel that appreciated. When I have been away from home, I have been looking forward to coming back but find unwelcome behaviour. This takes away my joy and excitement. The environment is not supportive enough to enable me rest and even write some of those experiences. I have at times thought, maybe I made a mistake.

Another related

When I put on my OD practitioner's hat I still carry with me my role as a wife and mother of three young, energetic boys aged 10, 7 and 6. Often times this means that in the midst of an intervention, usually late in the evenings or very early mornings, I need to make time to address these roles through phone calls and emails. My telephone conversations are often characterised with sorting out meal menus, fights amongst the boys, or listening to how their day at school was. I remember last year, one of the boys got quite ill and had many sleepless nights. I felt guilty about not being there to offer help in some way, comfort him or support my spouse to nurse him. Another time I had been away from home for almost two weeks. My seven year old's words on the phone cut me to the heart, 'I am missing you. I do not know what you look like anymore.'

### **Expectations at home**

Respondents felt the challenge of juggling work-home issues harder for women due to the extra expectations that are put on women in their cultures. One said:

There is too much work at home! You can not ignore it. Family members eagerly await for your shoulder echoing the common phrase "when mummy comes back..." Staying late at the office only postpones work at home.

Another said:

I have to work on reports and prepare for assignments from my home so even though I may be physically present, at such times I am often locked away in a room working.

This challenge does offer the opportunity of growth through – to become a better ‘dancer’.

Motherhood brought with it the need to manage my time more effectively, develop parenting skills and dance between the world of work and caring for a demanding daughter. I believe these experiences will stretch my inner potential and offer more opportunities to grow.

## **Managing life as a woman OD consultant**

One respondent shared some lessons she had learnt about how to manage in OD consultancy as a woman:

### **What has helped:**

Learning to say 'No' to some assignments that will cause very high levels of stress and a strain on the two roles has also helped. Refusing impossibly tight deadlines that clients ask for, but which would mean greatly sacrificing my family time.

Ensuring I leave enough space between assignments, so that I have enough time wrap up assignments, return home and reconnect sufficiently with family before I leave again.

Planning for the practical needs of my family before I leave. Planning and budgeting for daily phone calls while I am away also lessens the stress on me and keeps me connected.

Working with a co-facilitator who understands and appreciates 'my other life' and shows their support by asking after the family, and understands when I need to make a phone call during the day.

Working with a client who appreciates the many roles that I represent and puts this into consideration during each stage of the intervention, especially when contracting in regard to reporting deadlines.

Having a very supportive spouse and close family to take care of the children's needs, has helped me work in OD without too much worry.

My personal faith and trust in God that he will take care of my family as well as enable me do a good job keeps me going. Another respondent mentioned too 'In all these most difficult moments, I have found grace and joy in the Lord. His love for me really surprises.

## Conclusion

These personal experiences show that there are real differences facing women in OD. There are opportunities as well as challenges. But it is not always only about gender. Other factors like power or personality may come into play. Perhaps as one respondent said:

If you are very good at what you are doing and you do it professionally, it does not matter whether you are male or female. You get the same respect.

*What do you think? Is there a difference between women and men in OD? What are the underlying factors?*

Yet from these experiences four respondents sent in, what is clear is that:

Women in OD have a special contribution to make. Much depends on how we women understand and accept our femininity. We women are special, our contribution is unique and, together with men, we can make a difference in the lives of people and organisations.