The purpose of this tools is to explore the reasons behind resistance against gender equality, and to suggest ways to deal with this.

The promotion of equality between women and men at all levels of society is an international commitment with a solid legal and policy base. It requires appropriate public policies and transformation of governmental structures, notably the creation of institutional mechanisms for mainstreaming gender equality. Since governments agreed about this in 1995 when adhering to the Beijing Platform for Action, hundreds of policy documents and gender action plans have been implemented worldwide to address gender gaps at governmental level, in communities, in companies, in trade unions, in donor agencies, etc. Many advances have been made, many tools for gender mainstreaming have been developed, many people have received gender training and also: a lot of resistance has been met.

Who can use this building block?

Every stakeholder involved in development cooperation.

Why resistance?

Opposing gender equality means opposing human rights for half of the population. Why do people resist against equal rights for all?

Resistance is a normal reaction to change of the status quo, even in cases of potential positive outcomes. Resistances towards gender mainstreaming is often an expression of resistance towards (organizational) change in general. Gender is an issue that affects every person. Changing gender relations can be felt as disruptive in people’s lives, beliefs and culture. It may generate fear for the unknown, and it may affect people’s comfort zone. Kotter and Schlesinger identified four key reasons why individuals resist change:

- **Parochial self interest**
  Individuals are concerned with the implications for themselves. For example men may think that their career opportunities will reduce when women have equal opportunities. Women may think that they have to behave differently if they choose a career. People who resist gender equality because of self-interest often hold some pre-conceived idea as to how it may affect their life, their economic interest, or the established patterns of vested power.

- **Misunderstanding**
  Communication problems and inadequate information on what gender equality means, may lead to misunderstandings and resistance. Fear for the unknown will increase resistance and anxiety. A common prejudice consists in seeing

> “Often, the greater our ignorance about something, the greater our resistance to change.”

Marc Bekoff
gender mainstreaming as a strategy to favour women at the cost of men.

- **Low tolerance of change**
  Sense of insecurity, particularly for those people who need structure, stability and security can also be a reason behind resistance. Often people tend to stick to existing customs, structures and practices. They have their comfort and habits they wish to maintain. Any change in their work environment, be it gender mainstreaming or any other change, will provoke some kind of discomfort.

- **Different assessment of the situation**
  Disagreement over the need for change, because of disagreement over the advantages and disadvantages of gender equality can also lie at the basis of resistance. People know what gender mainstreaming is, but they are against it as they don’t wish a situation where gender equality prevails. Others may think that gender equality will automatically come with development and growth, as they do not recognize that gender inequalities depend on unequal gender relations and that growth re-distribution is dependent on power relations, including gender relations.

**How do people resist?**

Many people are ambivalent about gender equality or opposed to the changes it entails (including people in development agencies) and thus avoid taking real action.

Generally speaking, two types of resistance can be identified: active and passive resistance.

**Active resistance** consists of openly questioning the goal of gender equality, putting forward reasons and opinions against it, and often trying to persuade others to join the ‘camp of opposition’ against gender equality.

**Passive resistance** is hidden and difficult to detect. It takes time to discover who is passively resisting against implementing gender mainstreaming. Often they fake being supporters of gender equality, but their deeper feelings oppose the idea. Once they have to apply it in their own work, their resistance becomes manifest, and they quietly start to undermine or to sabotage the implementation of gender policy. **Others may say that they support gender equality but there are more urgent and pressing priorities to be addressed first.**

**How to deal with resistance against gender equality**

There are constructive ways to deal with this resistance. When gender equality issues are the subject of debate, you can prepare yourself in the following ways:

- **Take an approach that reflects your own respect for gender equality as a development objective.** Gender issues should be addressed as part of the main discussion about the sector or initiative in question. If instead they are just an extra agenda item (“finally, let us discuss the gender aspects...”) there is an implicit invitation to disregard them.

- **Do your research.** Start the discussion from an informed position. Investigate the gender equality issues that are relevant to the sector or initiative. Identify relevant government initiatives. Find out what women’s organisations have to say.
• **Identify internal and external allies.** Identify individuals or units in the partner organisation who are interested in gender equality issues (as a matter of personal commitment or organisational responsibility). Gain their views on issues and possibilities. The more people join you the pursuit of equality, the stronger the message will be.

• **Use clear language and make the issues concrete.** Raise the issues in a way that makes sense to your counterpart. For example, if you want to ensure that the benefits of an agricultural diversification initiative reach both women and men, then begin the discussion by saying that. People are more likely to be engaged when the relevance to their specific agendas or to country is clear.

• **Draw on national commitments to women’s rights and gender equality.** All partner countries have endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action and most have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Many have also formulated strategies to guide implementation of these commitments. These are important tools for dialogue on gender equality because they ground the discussion in commitments already made by individual countries.

*Source: Culture, Gender Equality And Development Co-Operation, OECD DAC GENDERNET Practice Notes, by Johanna Schalkwyk, June 2000 (Adapted from DAC Sourcebook on Concepts and Approaches Linked to Gender Equality (1998) (drawing on work by Sara Longwe)*

**What does resistance look like?**

Resistance to changing power relations and organizational structures can take different forms as described in the following (non-exhaustive) list:

1. Denial of the gender equality issue. *“We don’t have this problem here”*

2. Shift onto external realities. Other institutions or historical, social or educational causes. *“It because of poverty/cultural heritage/war”… “There are few women school managers because we have entered the teaching profession only 20 years ago”*

3. Minimizing the gender equality issue. *“We have more urgent priorities!”*

4. Non awareness of stereotypes. *“We don’t discriminate! The problem is that women are not interested in leadership positions”*

5. Women themselves having difficulties in recognizing discrimination *“Of course we are not discriminated against. It is a matter of personal choice, if you want a career or if you want to look after your family.”*

6. Insufficient motivation and conflict among staff. *“The equality committee is there only for their own interest!”*

7. Various forms of individual experiences of dissent. *“My wife loves washing dishes…. What’s wrong with this?”*

8. Lack of data, information, communication. *“We don’t have episodes of sexual harassment in this country, it’s against our culture”*
9. Isolation of the people dealing with gender issues. “Here comes the ‘gender police’ .... “

10. Stereotyping the gender inequality issue. “the project will have a (minor) component to take into account the special needs of vulnerable groups like women and the disabled”

11. Stereotyping in relationships in order to discriminate. “Women at work are not motivated, they just think about the family”

12. Stigmatization of women involved in positive actions. “She is there just because she is a woman....”

13. Disadvantages and male hostility “We are attacked... we’ll end up with no football if we go on like this”

14. Conflicts among women “She does not know what she does... she is there because she is friendly with the boss” “Put women in power and they end up fighting”

15. Individual diversity hides gender “I rather support the problem of indigenous people”

16. Ineffective monitoring systems “We do not have data or enough qualitative information to tell the truth...”

17. Tendency to delegate decisions to managers “They do not care so how can I do something?”


Some ideas on what to do

There exists no one size fits-all solution to overcome resistance but a few suggestions can be made.

In case of explicit denial, i.e. when opposers state that gender inequality is not a concern for the country (or region or community), you can present sound empirical evidence (recent statistics, case studies and research) to document gender disparity and discriminatory practices, and how they are closely interdependent with other major development problems. This is also useful when people tend to speak on behalf of women, generalising specific experiences as proof of the absence of the issue.

Often though, resistance is far less explicit. It can happen that action is promised but consists of small actions with limited impact. Here, it can be very useful to shift the attention towards the results of an initiative. It’s important to ask questions about how the project or action will contribute to improving the condition of women (internally in the organization, or externally towards the beneficiaries). An important step forward is to adopt a rights based perspective, that poses the enjoyment of human rights, including gender equality, at the centre of development planning and ensure that actions and results related to gender equality are systematically monitored. This also avoids void “lip service”, when people acknowledge gender equality issues at a rethoric level but fail to take action that impact (OECD DAC, 2000).
Other less explicit ways of resistance are “compartmentalisation” or the commissioning of a study. In the first case, matters concerning women or equality are immediately referred to the person officially responsible for “women’s development”. Here, it can be useful to make a solid case about the relevance of gender equality issues to the agency’s work or specific project. Underlining the positive outcomes and how gender equality will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the operations, can be very convincing. In the second case, the commissioning of a study might be ambivalent. While research may be required, this should not be a way to postpone concrete action. In case this is happening, you can propose action research, or pilot projects based on what’s already known (OECD DAC, 2000).

Gender equality discussions often oblige people re-think their own beliefs and judgments. Many may have shut communication channels – even unawarely – even before talking. A non-judgemental approach to communication and respectful and active listening can help open positive communication channels and find a common group to start meaningful, realistic and non ideological discussions.

When dealing with open or hidden resistance be aware that the social and cultural change needed to progress towards gender equality is not necessarily a linear process, so there can be moments of great advances – thanks to historical momentum, positive or negative economic conditions, or committed leadership – and backlashes. It is important to continue to collect sound evidence and help decision makers remember the culture and traditions cannot be used to breech legal and policy commitments to human rights and equality. Often the argument is made that “gender equality” is a priority for feminists from countries from the North of the world. You can remind your interlocutor that the most active proponents of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 were actually women’s groups and activists from the South of the world, as well as make sure that women’s groups from the country in object are involved in your discussions.

Change agents should be ready to build strong and competent alliances, strive for institutionalizing accountability and monitoring systems and know that the achievement of gender equality is a long term incremental process and still an “unfinished business” in most countries.

References and further reading


