

NGO Strategies for Gender Mainstreaming in HIV/AIDS Programming

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Abstract

Women and girls experience specific challenges in the face of high HIV rates as a result of cultural norms and practices which reinforce their disadvantaged economic position and social status. Agencies responding to this human security crisis have employed gender mainstreaming strategies to mitigate the effects of HIV-related problems for women. However, the technical solutions, or quick fixes, associated with gender mainstreaming fail to address the attitudes, norms and behaviours, which reinforce gender inequality. This paper argues that gender mainstreaming strategies are limited by the superficiality of NGO approaches for addressing gender inequality and HIV/AIDS underscoring the need for transformative planning, as well as attitudinal and behavioural changes. Several successes have been recorded within development organizations as these NGOs design HIV/AIDS mainstreaming strategies in an effort to prevent, and mitigate the effects of, HIV/AIDS. These lessons along with the strategies employed by a handful of dedicated individuals have the potential to make real change in the way in which development NGOs think about gender mainstreaming. This paper uncovers some of these strategies with an emphasis on how these innovative approaches can facilitate women's empowerment.

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“Issues on the table are like ladies fashions, it all depends on what’s in style this year ... Gender has been put on the shelf at the moment. Two other important issues must first be addressed: HIV and famine, because these two issues are about saving lives” (NGO staff member: Malawi, 2003).

It is common procedure for organisations to compartmentalise and prioritise issues; in fact, NGOs have been using programmatic divisions as a way to solicit funding from multiple donors for decades. In the 1980s and early 1990s, many development NGOs designed gender programmes in an effort to highlight gender inequality and provide training workshops to staff members. Separate gender programmes proved to be a useful means of attracting donor money. These gender programmes operated alongside other development initiatives such as food security, environmental rehabilitation, and more recently HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention programmes. However, immediately following the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women, most countries adopted national strategies for mainstreaming gender in all development initiatives. NGOs also embarked on a new formula for addressing gender inequality through the development of gender mainstreaming policies.

Despite efforts at the policy level and a growing awareness of the crosscutting gender issues in development programmes, gender mainstreaming has been slow to translate from policy into action. Several reasons help us understand why this is so. First, gender issues and AIDS continue to be viewed by many NGO staff as separate and unrelated programmatic issues. Some NGO staff members (especially senior level male NGO staff) continue to resist any discussion of gender inequality in their work. For many male staff members, gender issues are irrelevant to the development problems they seek to address. As one NGO staff member stated while commenting on the challenges of translating gender policy into practice: “maybe we are the roadblocks

ourselves”. This comment was directed at male colleagues who scoff at attempts to talk about gender and HIV with community member and underscores a very real problem for addressing gender inequality and the rapid spread of HIV in Malawi.

A second reason involves the gendered nature of organisations themselves and the ways in which gender inequality is produced and reproduced within organisations on a daily basis through the sanctioning of norms, behaviours and practices, which reinforce gender inequality. A third important factor is the challenge of overseeing and integrating gender in all programmes and activities. Staff members responsible for gender mainstreaming are seldom in positions of power which enable them to make decisions about, and modifications to, other personnel’s programmes. Yet, mainstreaming approaches have the potential to alter organisational norms and practices. Recent attempts to mainstream HIV/AIDS within development organisations in Malawi, for example, has been met with considerable success and provides some lessons for those attempting to mainstream gender. In this paper, I begin by defining gender mainstreaming, summarise several gender issues associated with HIV/AIDS in Malawi, and highlight some of the challenges of translating gender mainstreaming policies into practice by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Malawi. In the final section of this paper, examples of the successes of HIV/AIDS mainstreaming are analysed to shed light on the potential for gender mainstreaming strategies to translate from policy into action.

Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy for institutionalizing gender concerns within development organizations and their development projects. The term gender mainstreaming, popularized during the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995, is concerned with changes to mainstream policies and resource allocations to achieve gender equality.

Many donor organizations, United Nations agencies and NGOs have adopted the language of gender mainstreaming; however, few studies have documented the impact these gender mainstreaming policies have in practice. Gender mainstreaming involves both the integration of women into existing systems as active participants, and to changes to the existing systems to reduce gender inequalities stemming from women's disadvantaged position in society. As such, gender mainstreaming is both a technical and political process (Kardam, 1997) requiring changes in the cultures, values and practices of organizations for the purpose of confronting gender inequality. Gender mainstreaming has been adopted by international agencies to address the root causes of gender inequality "which can be found in the social structures, institutions, values and beliefs which create and perpetuate women's subordination" (UNDP, 2000:281). Governments and NGOs have also adopted the language of gender mainstreaming; however, this language has not adequately translated into specific gender-sensitive practices and strategies for HIV/AIDS programming at any level.

Most striking in reviewing the available literature on gender mainstreaming is the almost exclusive concentration at the policy level. Gender mainstreaming is adopted by various UN agencies such as the UNDP and other international agencies to address the root causes of gender inequality "which can be found in the social structures, institutions, values and beliefs which create and perpetuate women's subordination" (UNDP, 2002:281). As such, these UN documents offer how-to prescriptions for creating gender policies within organizations and extol the virtues of this approach for getting development right for women. Yet a small, but important, body of literature has emerged in the past few years pointing to the challenges NGOs experience in translating these gender and development principles into practice.

The challenges identified by some of these authors include the practical issues such as

lack of accountability to women beneficiaries (Goetz, 1998) and the need for responsive development planning involving development bureaucrats since “field workers are not neutral actors mechanically implementing top-level policy directives; they help to constitute the structure of power relations in the rural environment” (Goetz, 2001:22). Other constraints include limited exposure to the language of gender equality and lack of funding to turn these policies into action. Some authors have pointed to the deep structures of organizational life which prevent gender mainstreaming (Rao, Stuart, Kelleher, 1999); patriarchal culture which marginalizes women and women’s interests (Mies, 1986; Walby, 1988); as well as organizational ideologies, value systems, structures, and management styles (Macdonald, Sprenger, Dubel, 1997) which promote masculine cultures. All of these bodies of literature offer insights into the gendered practices and norms within organizations as well as the gendered attitudes and behaviours held by NGO staff. These norms and attitudes, however, stem from specific cultural practices within Malawian society. Some of those practices (especially how they exacerbate HIV/AIDS rates in Malawi) are discussed in the section that follows.

Gender Inequality and HIV/AIDS

What makes Malawi a compelling case study for an analysis of gender mainstreaming in HIV/AIDS programming is its high rate of HIV infection combined with gender norms which place a unequal burden on women. Estimates suggest that approximately one out of every ten Malawians is infected with HIV and that more women than men are reportedly infected (UNAIDS, 1999). The Malawian National AIDS Control Programme estimates infection rates among women attending antenatal clinics are between 10% in rural areas and 30% in urban areas. The high proportion of HIV positive women in child-bearing age also has serious

implications for parent-to-child¹ transmission. Furthermore, evidence now demonstrates that HIV infection in younger females aged 15-24 is about 4 to 6 times higher than the infection rate in their male counterparts (National AIDS Commission of Malawi, 2000). Biological differences are part of the reason for a higher incidence of HIV infection among women.

Specific characteristics and norms within Malawian society are also known to increase the likelihood of HIV transmission including social and economic variables and disparity between the rich and poor. Malawi ranks among the world's least developed countries. While there is a small number of rich and middle class individuals in the country, the vast majority of Malawians are living in absolute poverty. The economy is heavily dependent on inflows of economic assistance from the IMF, the World Bank, and individual donor nations. Despite these donor funds, the government of Malawi faces major challenges to provide employment opportunities and to improve educational and health facilities. Many Malawians are therefore unemployed, underemployed or employed in labour that poses a high risk of mortality. For several decades in the 1990s, a large number of Malawians travelled to South Africa as mine labourers: an occupation known for its high mortality rate. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the South African government began random testing of miners for HIV. An especially high incidence of HIV was found among the Malawian mine workers. As a result, the South African government proposed mandatory testing to which the Malawian government refused and in the early 1990s all Malawians who tested positive were sent home and Malawians were no longer sent to work on these mines (Raditapole, 2004; Chirwa, 1998).

In an effort to understand the correlation between high HIV rates and mine workers,

¹Several female NGO staff members noted that the language of mother-to-child transmission casts blame on the woman for passing HIV onto her child when, in fact, in most cases it the husband who will contract HIV through casual sex with multiple partners.

Catherine Campbell carried out an extensive study in Summertown, South Africa. She interviewed mine workers who commented that low rates of condom use among mine workers who have sex with prostitutes may be best understood by the following observation: “the risk of HIV/AIDS appears minimal compared with the risks of death underground” (Campbell, 2003: 31).

Mine work, like other forms of employment that take men away from their wives for extended periods of time, increase the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. This is true for employment on estate farms where men live in barracks at night but work on plantations (such as tea or sugar cane) during the day. Sex trade workers are frequently housed nearby to encourage the farm workers to stay. Truck driving corridors are also considered high risk locations. Dangerous road conditions make driving in Malawi dangerous. However, the rest stops along the trucking routes can also be dangerous as they are well stocked with beer and the availability of “bar girls” or sex trade workers. Mining, plantation work or the sex trade are often last resorts for employment; however, escalating poverty in Malawi combined with recent events such as the food shortage of 2001 make these forms of employment increasingly attractive to Malawians.

Several authors have documented changes in labour relations and gender inequality in Malawi. Hirschman (1990, 1995), Davison (1997) and Peters (1997), for example, examined the impact of male migration on households and the changes in the gender division of labour that ensued. This literature sheds light on historical practices and contemporary norms surrounding gender relations in Malawi. This body of literature has been particularly instructive for those tracing the health impacts of migrant labour and HIV transmission.

High rates of HIV infection have also been found among wealthy and highly educated groups in Malawi. The Malawian parliament, for example, lost 28 MPs to AIDS in a four year

period between 1998 and 2001 according to a report by the parliamentary Speaker Sam Mpasu. Some of the highest incidences of HIV infection are among the most educated populations. For example, “[s]tudies in urban chronic-care wards suggest the infection rate among educated, middle-class people is as high as 50 per cent” (Panjwani, 2002). Therefore, poverty alone is not a sufficient determinant for an analysis of the spread of HIV. Other factors beyond socio-economic status must also be considered when addressing the risk and spread of HIV/AIDs.

Perceptions of what it means to be “a man” continue to reinforce specific societal and sexual norms. For example, some NGO staff members who carry out projects in rural communities frequently insist on returning to the nearest town or rest house/truck stops in the evenings. The NGO staff members were asked why they preferred to sleep in the rest houses, which are often attached to noisy drinking establishments rather than the tents provided for them in the rural communities. Their response was that they were going to be away from their wives/girlfriends for more than a few days and that they could not be expected to go several days without sex. Expectations surrounding men’s virility and peer pressure are important cultural and societal issues, which need to be highlighted in HIV/AIDS prevention work. Research on young men between the age of 10 and 24, in particular, found that young men often do not see themselves at great risk from HIV/AIDS. “In Zambia, for example, 64% of young men 15 - 24 thought themselves at no risk at all from AIDS compared to 53% of young women. This is despite the fact that having unprotected sex with multiple partners is relatively common among this age group” (Scalway, 2001).

Additional reasons for the high rate of HIV transmission in the country include gender-specific norms including negative attitudes toward women; women’s inability to make decisions about sex; and weak, inequitable, and even oppressive social support systems (National AIDS

Commission of Malawi, 2000). Gender inequality in Malawi is linked to inequities in social, cultural, economic, and political areas. In particular, women are disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS; women are often infected at an earlier age than men are; and gender-based violence accounts for a large proportion of HIV infections in women. Cultural norms of polygamy among men mean that even women in stable relationships are often vulnerable to HIV infection. These and other gender issues including the impact on women and young girls are summarised below.

Inequality between the sexes limits women's access to care and services. It also reduces both men and women's opportunities to acquire knowledge about safer sexual practices, and to develop skills to protect themselves from HIV. Inequality between men and women stems from differences in attitudes toward men's and women's sexuality, both within and outside of marriage. Promiscuity and polygamy is the norm for men in Malawi; however, it increases the risks of exposure for men to a variety of infections, and therefore increases the possibility those men will transmit HIV/AIDS to their partners.

Cultural attitudes toward suitable sexual behaviours and norms make it difficult for men to admit to gaps in their knowledge about sex and to the link between socialising and alcohol use (UNIFEM, 2001). Society accepts multiple sex partners as an expression of male sexuality and masculinity. However, this acceptance limits behaviour change. Research conducted in Zomba by Forster (2001) reveals a pattern whereby men reinforce their positions of power in relation to women and are able to do so partly as a result of holding back income to be used for their own personal enjoyment. Usually, this money is spent on beer and casual sex with "bar girls": both activities are considered an "essential expression of masculine enjoyment" (Forster, 2001, 247-248). Men buy sex as an expression of wealth and/or power. Other reasons why men buy sex can be explained by a desire for sexual acts they cannot ask from their wives, distance from their

wives, and/or societal norms surrounding myths of having sex with a woman who is menstruating or pregnant.

Several other cultural practices have exacerbated the negative impact of HIV/AIDS on women in Malawian society. Property grabbing, for example, has resulted in women losing their personal possessions to in-laws when their husband dies. Widowed women in Malawi face a variety of cultural issues in maintaining the property they accumulated with their husbands due to traditional laws and new cultural norms surrounding inheritance practices.

Widows are often victims of discriminatory inheritance practices in which the majority of the estate is taken unlawfully by the deceased husband's family. The Law Commissioner of Malawi has undertaken a review of legislation that discriminates against women and has proposed legislation to bring the law into compliance with new constitutional standards. In 1998 Parliament passed a wills and inheritance bill that increased widows' rights. However, these constitutional rights recognised under constitutional law often go unrecognised under traditional laws in Malawi.

In many parts of Malawi where patrilineal relationships are the norm, women move to their husbands' villages after marriage. If a woman's husband dies, she may be forced to marry her husband's brother or return to her home village with her children, leaving behind all the property acquired during her marriage. In difficult times, women often return to communities that can spare little to help their returning relatives. These traditional practices of inheritance, or property grabbing, have added significantly to the grief and hardship endured by many Malawian widows. Even in cases when husbands have instructed their families to ensure the wives inherit what was accumulated during marriage, these wishes are frequently unobserved (IRIN Nov 29, 2002). Education, outreach and legal counseling are provided by an organization, which was set

up to help protect women's rights to inheritance. The Women and Law Society (WLSA) works to promote women's rights and to ensure those women gain access to the inheritance their husbands leave behind.

The government of Malawi addresses women's concerns through the Ministry of Gender, Youth, and Community Services. Various other organisations are involved in the promotion of gender equality in Malawi. For example the National Commission on Women in Development co-ordinates government and NGO activities. The Gender Initiative Network, an informal association of women's NGOs, attempts to bring together the largely urban women's rights activists and the overwhelming rural majority to discuss common interests. In an effort to balance power relations between men and women, the Government of Malawi in 1998 produced a *Malawi Platform for Action*, which acknowledges the importance of the new Constitution in safeguarding the rights and freedoms of women. The Constitution also identifies areas of focus in the process of promoting equality and human rights of women, enhancing the effective participation of women in development, and integrating a gender perspective into development. However, lack of legal protection combined with high rates of HIV infection, large medical bills, inability to work, and large funeral expenses, are putting additional stress on the women of the country.

Changing demographics are combining with new forms of hardship in rural Malawi as people struggle with both increased health related problems and food shortages. NGOs working in Malawi need to recognise the inter-related and overlapping issues of food security, the escalating rate of HIV/AIDS infections and gender inequality. Gender mainstreaming policies have therefore become a specific strategy adopted by NGOs in Malawi. Yet the sound gender sensitive policies adopted within the organisations do not necessarily translate into practices to

promote gender equality in the country and often fail to address the specific gender-related challenges of the AIDS crisis.

Gender Mainstreaming in NGOs

Several years ago the Beijing Conference on Women (1995) highlighted gender mainstreaming as the way forward for gender and development policy and practice. At the national level, most governments have adopted the *Beijing Platform for Action*, the document emerging from the Beijing Conference on Women, which highlights gender mainstreaming as central to development policies.

In response to international pressures and the government of Malawi's National *Platform for Action*, NGOs operating in Malawi have made gender mainstreaming a principal component in all their development programs. Part of what makes gender mainstreaming a fascinating subject of study is the way in which this language has been adopted by Malawian NGO staff in the face of growing criticisms in the country that gender is a 'foreign' or 'western' concept that has no place in Malawian development planning. The 'culture' of gender mainstreaming is understood by many Malawian NGO staff as relevant to women living and working in North America and Europe and not applicable to the cultural norms and practices in a Malawian context. This attitude towards gender issues is an important factor in the potential for translating policy into practice.

Gender mainstreaming is an attempt to get at the heart of gender denial, struggles over meanings and patriarchal structures, values and beliefs. Rounaq Jahan's book *The Elusive Agenda: Mainstreaming Women in Development* (1995) is an important, early contribution to the body of literature on gender mainstreaming in which she argues that women should not only be integrated into the mainstream, but should also redefine the mainstream. There is a clear need for

attention to the ways in which power structures, both national and global, confine and designate changes at the local level and particularly between men and women (Parpart, 2000). It is imperative that we understand how cultural practices, discourse, language and values facilitate and entrench these power inequalities and often disempower women (Parpart and Marchand, 1995). Theoretical analyses of gender inequality point to the role that patriarchy plays in the creation and maintenance of the structures, values and beliefs that affect men and women differently (Mies, 1986; Walby, 1988). Patriarchy is one of the oldest forms of exploitation and reinforces divisions between men and women that are considered natural and biological. Patriarchy, however, gets played out differently in different contexts requiring a more nuanced analysis of the multiple relations of inequality in diverse settings.

Other feminist analyses address class, status, race, and cultural practices as factors contributing to gender inequality. However, these theoretical frameworks have not sufficiently helped us understand the challenges to gender mainstreaming in organizations nor do they have predictive power. Goetz (1998) calls for new analyses to “get institutions right for women in development’. Such analyses need to begin with grounded research in specific locations investigating cultures, norms, beliefs, the social construction of gender relations, and how inequalities and patriarchies get played out in day-to-day practices.

NGOs in Malawi have adopted gender policies, trained staff about gender issues, and created gender departments in which staff members are required to coordinate the gender strategies of the organization. Strategies for gender equality are supposed to ensure accountability to the people NGOs represent and to promote gender equality within and outside their organizations. However, slow progress in gender equitable programming and the limited implementation of gender-informed planning among many NGOs calls for new analyses of the

constraints and limitations of NGOs as change agents; especially in relation to their accountability upwards to donors rather than to the communities.

A growing body of literature demonstrates how NGOs are addressing donor demands for gender equality at the organizational, program, policy and project levels and some of the specific challenges the Malawian NGOs face. These challenges include practical issues such as lack of accountability to women (Goetz, 1998); limited exposure to gender terminology; insufficient funding and resources to carry out gender programs; and lack of reporting on the challenges and opportunities of gender mainstreaming strategies (Tiessen, 1999). Additional challenges point to the deep structures of organizational life which prevent gender mainstreaming (Rao, Stuart and Kelleher, 1999), as well as organizational ideologies, value systems, structures, and management styles (Macdonald, Sprenger, Dubel, 1997). For NGOs operating in Malawi today, even those who have made gender mainstreaming a central priority in development planning, these challenges are exacerbated by tensions and dynamics stemming from donor-NGO relations.

For example, during conversations with an NGO staff member in Malawi in 2001, it was noted that for three years she has attempted to implement leadership training with rural women community members in an effort to facilitate empowerment and address gender inequality within Malawian communities. The NGO staff member's attempts to obtain funding and approval to carry out this initiative have been repeatedly thwarted by senior NGO staff members who do not consider this initiative a priority. However, recent international donor funds to this NGO have stipulated that leadership training at the community level is a priority. Since the suggestion filtered down from the donors, senior management staff agreed to this development program and have given the mid and junior level staff a directive to begin leadership training for empowerment.

Research conducted with NGO staff points to slow changes in behaviours as well as organizational cultures, which do not permit gender equitable development. Specific strategies are needed to facilitate gender balance in staffing, including recruitment and promotion. A more conducive environment is required for the discussion of gender issues, including informal means that identify issues in the work place. In Malawi, a number of advocacy activities and gender sensitization activities were facilitated for Members of Parliament in 1998 that led to the passing of the Wills & Inheritance Act in Parliament. The Act proposes a number of changes for protecting women, especially widows, by being able to inherit the property of their spouses. These laws are crucial for raising the profile of gender and ensuring more resources are allocated to activities to promote gender equality within Malawi. However, changing attitudes towards women is a critical factor in making these policies and laws work.

Gender inequality is constructed on a daily basis through the gendered norms, attitudes and practices of individuals. The continual re-invention of gendered organisations ensures the maintenance of the status quo and therefore the privileging of male/masculine interests over female/feminine interests. Addressing gender inequality within organisations requires new ways of thinking about gender mainstreaming that get to the heart of gendered practices and the individual and organisational mechanisms through which gender inequality is perpetuated.

The gender dimension in NGOs includes roles and power which are divided along gender lines and “reflect rather than contradict wider society with its stereotypical views of women; here, women act as servers of men; seldom function as decision- or policy- makers; and are seen as women first and workers second” (Fowler, 1997:78). Societal norms and perceptions of culture play an important role in shaping behaviours and attitudes toward women and toward gender program initiatives within organisations. The challenges that organisations face in getting

their structures and practices right for gender and development cannot be neatly written off as superficial changes to organisational operations. Hiring more female staff, and sending more staff to gender training workshops can have some impact on the organisation's ability to mainstream gender; however, they alone are not sufficient for challenging the gendered structures of organisations and the deeply rooted gendered attitudes of organisational staff. Rather, attention needs to be placed on behavioural changes among organisational staff, which ensures that gender issues are carefully thought through in all organisational initiatives. In order to get to the core of gendered institutions, this means becoming aware of the deep structures of organisations and how these are "embedded in our own unconscious" (Rao, Stuart and Kelleher, 1999:224).

An examination of NGO² activities between 1996 and 2003 uncovered several challenges to gender mainstreaming and a limited commitment at the organisational and individual levels to address gender inequality. While most organisations demonstrated some commitment to doing gender sensitive work in their projects, most organisational staff members were adamant that the organisation itself was gender neutral. An overall increase in the number of women hired within NGOs was documented between the early 1990s and 2003. However, few women were hired at senior management level and the majority of NGO staff members were men (approximately 67%).

NGO staff members highlighted a variety of activities that have been used to increase awareness about gender inequality such as attending gender training workshops. However, the material learned by one staff member during the training workshops was not being shared with

² A total of 23 NGOs were involved in this study. Interviews and surveys were carried out with these NGOs to learn about the gender mainstreaming strategies these organizations had employed. The NGOs consisted of both national organizations and international NGOs. The sample group of organizations studied specialized in community development, environmental management and sustainable agriculture.

other staff members nor was the information translating into any changes to project and programme development. Many male NGO staff equating gender inequality concerns with “females complaining”. Staff appointed to carry out gender sensitisation programmes among the organisational staff faced various obstacles as these staff members – usually women who were also holding another position within the organisation such as secretarial or administrative support – were unable to assert any influence in the organisation. Their efforts were often ridiculed and considered a waste of valuable time. One female staff member who tried to perform a gender sensitisation workshop in her organisation was unable to complete the session due to the sneers and jokes made by her male colleagues as she attempted to educate men about masculinity and femininity.

Several NGO staff members attributed the problems with gender mainstreaming to a perceived division between public and private matters. Many individuals felt uncomfortable discussing what they believed to be private matters such as how men and women relate to each other. Organisations are deemed to be gender neutral spaces and therefore many staff members considered these gender discussions an invasion on their personal lives. Yet, a variety of examples of the gendered nature of organisations were made apparent in the practices uncovered within the organisation. For example, women were expected to fulfil duties within the organisation that were considered an extension of their roles in the home. For example, female staff members were expected to help prepare lunch. In another example, a female staff member had to request her travel allowance on several occasions because, as she described the situation, “this is how women ask for money in the home”. Women are required to ask for money on several occasions as a show of submission and respect.

The unwillingness to address private matters in public spaces is a realistic and

understandable challenge. However, it not clear why gender inequality remains a “sensitive” and “private” matter when an even more personal issue – sexual health – has become so widely embraced as an organisational concern in the past few years.

Learning from HIV/AIDS Mainstreaming

In the past few years, many organisations have adopted an approach to mainstreaming HIV/AIDS within the NGO. This initiative grew out of a concern for high staff turn-over rates within organisations; stigma attached to those infected with, or affected by, HIV; HIV screening in some corporations which deny jobs to those who are found HIV positive; high rates of absenteeism due to illness or attending funerals; and for the sustainability of development programmes (as community members try to implement development projects with fewer and fewer resources and less time).

For many organizations in Malawi, mainstreaming HIV/AIDS begins with widespread education and awareness raising about AIDS within the organization. In the past year, marked changes were noted in terms of the visibility of HIV material within organizations. NGOs have front foyers plastered with posters about HIV/AIDS and how to prevent the spread. It is not uncommon to find a basket of condoms free of charge placed at the front desk of many organizations and NGOs are holding information sessions on a regular basis to assist staff members in learning how to talk about HIV with each other and with the communities. The organizations that were involved in these studies would not classify themselves as HIV/AIDS organizations. The primary focus of most of the work carried out by the organizational staff interviewed is environmental management, sustainable agriculture and community development.

Several organizations have instituted programmes, which enable staff members to get confidential testing and information; and in some cases, staff members and their spouses are

provided with free anti-retro viral (ARV) drugs. These strategies demonstrate a growing commitment to translating policies on mainstreaming into practice through increasing systematic procedures within the organization designed to alter attitudes and behaviours. In one example, a staff member talked about the HIV/AIDS policy for their organization as an important first step in realizing that this is a human rights issue and those who are HIV positive have the right to declare their status openly and publicly without fear of retribution.

At the heart of these HIV/AIDS mainstreaming strategies is the need to make individual behaviour changes and to take a personal approach to confronting and addressing AIDS. HIV/AIDS programmes can be understood as part of the public work of organisational staff educating community members about the development challenges of HIV. However, these programmes most certainly tap into the very private matters of sexual norms, practices and individual health. Gender mainstreaming, however, continues to be seen as ‘something out there’ that NGO staff do in the communities rather than a personal issue that begins with individuals changing their own attitudes or an organisational issue requiring systematic changes to policy and procedures.

An additional strategy adopted by an international NGO working in Malawi is the formation of groups of people living with AIDS. These support groups encourage and motivate each other and enable them to change their behaviours and approaches. Some of the support groups are in the form of youth clubs whereby the youth are kept busy with sports, poetry, music, etc. in order to prevent opportunities for sexual activities. These programmes are being implemented with an age group referred to as the “window of hope” or children aged 5 to 15 who are not yet sexually active.

One organization committed to mainstreaming HIV/AIDS both within the organization

and in the villages has begun using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques to help community members talk openly about HIV/AIDS and how it is affecting them and their prospects for development. However, the commitment of the individual NGO staff member and the organization's commitment to gender equality have resulted in an effort to discuss HIV/AIDS and gender inequality as inter-related issues. When the NGO staff member responsible for gender and HIV mainstreaming first raised the prospect of using PRA to educate and talk with communities about AIDS and gender inequality, her co-workers were skeptical. Many of the NGO staff members still consider community members to be ignorant about HIV and the associated gender issues. However, the gender and HIV mainstreaming officer persisted and after meeting with community members and local extension staff she was impressed with their willingness to discuss these issues. According to her, "it is all about asking the right questions". If you begin by asking communities how AIDS is affecting them, they may be unwilling to initiate a discussion. By using PRA techniques, however, this NGO staff member was able to get communities to talk about which households were suffering the most; which fields were laying fallow; which households are headed by women; and which houses are falling apart and in need of repair. This information was then used to initiate a discussion as to why these problems were arising and what can be done to address them. It was at this point that community members began to express their concern for the number of people dying and the ways in which AIDS is threatening their capacity to produce food and provide for themselves.

The information from such activities such as resource mapping of vulnerable groups provides the much needed information about who has died in the community; which age group is particularly affected; where the orphaned children are living; women who have been affected by "property grabbing"; and how communities are coping with the effects of high mortality rates.

The identification of vulnerable groups can also help NGO and government extension staff to better direct their resources and projects. The findings from this PRA exercise shed light on how HIV is being contracted and spread and the societal norms that facilitate these practices. The long-term effects of AIDS on the community were also discussed especially in terms of how women and girls often taken on additional responsibilities to look after those who are sick or left behind when parents die.

The resistance to discussions about HIV/AIDS, in this example, was not coming from the communities as some of the staff members predicted. Rather, the resistance came from the staff members themselves. Thus, despite the successes experienced with HIV/AIDS mainstreaming, ongoing challenges exist as efforts are made to educate all staff members about the potential for change in behaviours and attitudes. A similar experience was noted in the late 1990s when some NGOs began to carry out gender awareness sessions with rural communities in the country. Many NGO staff working in urban areas expressed concerns that community members in rural Malawi would be unable to discuss gender issues due to the deep-rooted cultural beliefs about power and gender norms in society. It was the educated, middle-class male NGO staff members in particular who considered gender awareness and sensitisation programmes a waste of time. Nonetheless, some organisations persisted and were met with community members who were both knowledgeable about the meaning of gender (have learned about it on the radio) and willing to discuss some of the challenges gender inequality poses for them in their own personal lives.

A group of individuals have also developed volunteer associations comprised of people committed to addressing gender inequality and HIV/AIDS in the country. Members of these associations visit schools and youth groups to help facilitate discussions about HIV/AIDS and how young people can protect themselves. The volunteers involved in this initiative reported the

visits have been empowering for the youth that appreciate a forum to discuss issues that are otherwise not discussed. The volunteers also expressed how the initiative was empowering for themselves giving them confidence and leadership skills that they considered useful for both their private and public relationships.

Conclusion

The findings from research on gender mainstreaming in Malawi uncovers some examples of the small successes made through individual initiatives but also some of the larger institutional and organisational obstacles to gender mainstreaming. Finding ways to educate NGO staff members about gender inequality and the benefits of gender mainstreaming is essential for real and sustained changes to the quality of life for both men and women in Malawi. The commitment at the personal level to make gender equality a matter of priority in all development programming, especially HIV/AIDS programmes, is essential for getting beyond the superficiality of writing gender issues into donor proposals and reports. In Malawi, gender mainstreaming in HIV programming requires increased attention to the ways in which NGOs recreate gendered norms within the organisational structures and the ways in which these organisational norms translate into gendered practices in the communities in which these organisations work. Behaviours and attitudes of organisational staff are therefore very important to an analysis of gender inequality. The spread of HIV in Malawi is strongly influenced by societal norms. The specific norms and behaviours of individuals hamper translating gender mainstreaming policies into practice. Uncovering these attitudes and behaviours held by NGO staff is therefore essential to understanding the barriers to gender mainstreaming in HIV programming.

As long as gender inequality remains a back-burner issue that gets addressed when all

other problems are resolved, gender mainstreaming will continue to be a watered down process whereby NGOs continue to make superficial mention of the gender issues in their work. The challenge for organisations is to look critically at their own behaviours and practices, which limit the possibilities for change. Gender mainstreaming relies on individual commitments to making gender equality a priority. For some individuals, a great deal of success has been achieved in this regard as organisational staff members ignore their colleagues scepticism and find innovative strategies to encourage community members to discuss issues that are rarely discussed in public.

The commitment to HIV/AIDS mainstreaming in NGOs in Malawi offers some hope for those who are working hard to find ways of mainstreaming gender in development programmes. HIV/AIDS mainstreaming requires NGO staff members to address “private” matters in “public spaces”. The systematic procedures adopted within NGOs to address attitudes and behaviours towards sexual norms and practices create new spaces for similar procedures for addressing attitudes and behaviours that reinforce gender inequality both within the organisation and in the communities in which these NGO staff members work.

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