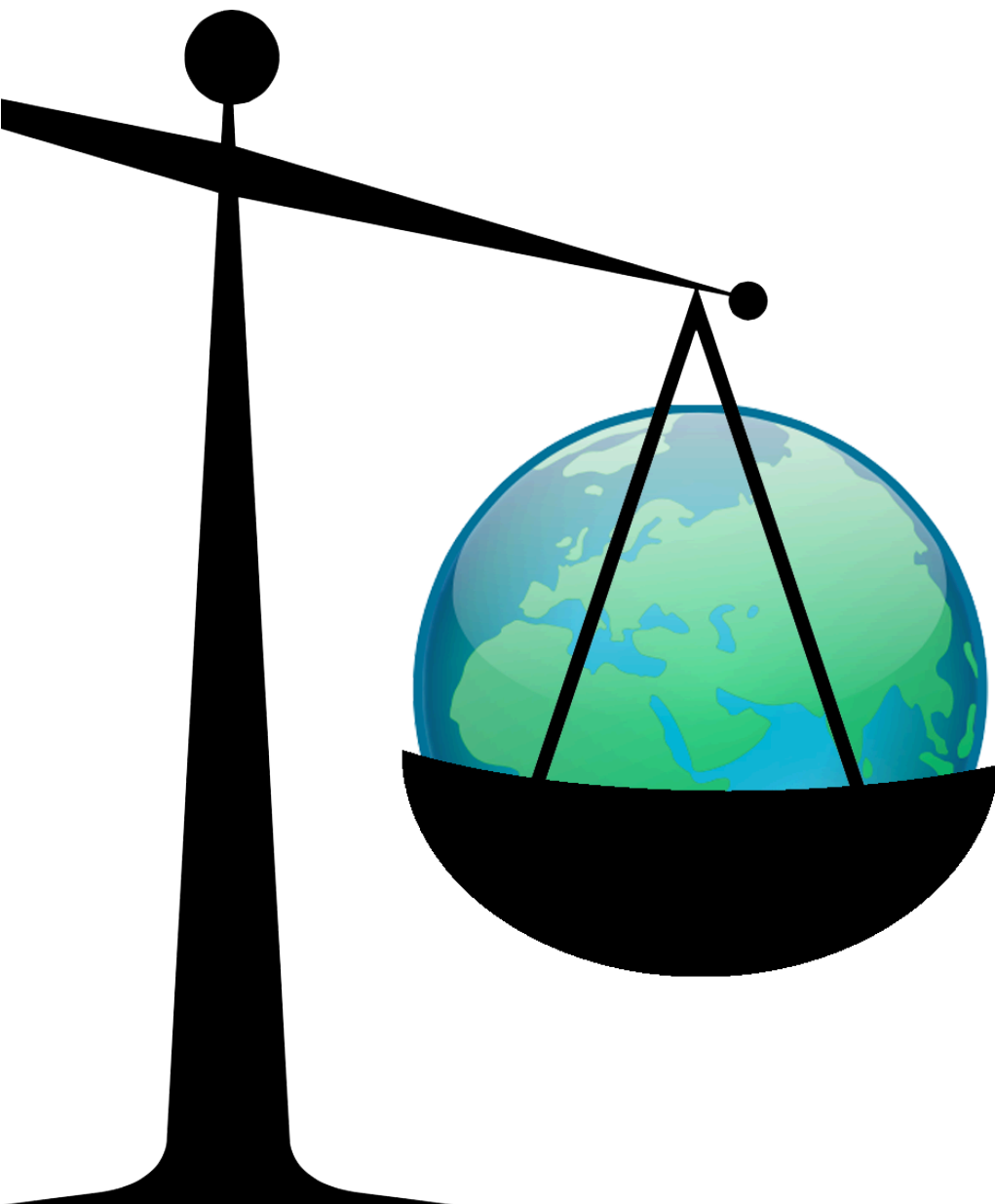
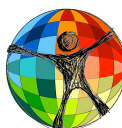


Gender Inequality and NGOs in Africa



INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INTERNSHIP WORKING PAPER SERIES

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Introduction

Gender inequality affects women in almost every corner of the world in different ways- in the workplace, at home, in the private and the public spheres, influencing their relationships with their friends and families, and limiting the opportunities available to them in a seemingly infinite variety of ways. Movements toward gender equality have attempted to redress this imbalance, fighting for the rights of women and girls. These movements have taken on different shapes, using different strategies to address gender inequality. However, the Western human rights movement has in many ways dominated the discourse on gender, a phenomenon which can be witnessed through the mushrooming of Western NGOs in the developing world, and particularly in Africa. Transplanting Western notions about gender equality onto a myriad of non-Western societies via NGOs has not proved to be entirely successful; on the contrary, in some cases we not only see these NGOs failing to make any significant progress towards gender equality, but also failing to address the gender equality in their own workplaces. This phenomenon is occurring for various reasons, the most important of which are issues around funding conditionalities and the transplantation of Western discourse onto non-Western societies whose priorities may be very different. In order for ideas about gender equality to gain any real traction, and have an actual impact on women's lives, they must be rooted in local movements, drawing on local people power and working with, or even within, the framework of culture and tradition.

In order to explore this issue, I will begin by explaining my personal experience as an intern during the summer of 2012 at an NGO operating in Kampala, Uganda, in order to provide some context for this paper.

Then, in part one, I will explore the rapid growth of mostly western-based NGOs in the African context, as well as the focus by these NGOs on participatory development strategies and the empowerment of women.

In part two, I will discuss the deep-rooted gender inequality of many African cultures, and the risk of the reproduction of this inequality within the organizational structures of NGOs working in the region. I will use this phenomenon to demonstrate the limits on the capacities of NGOs to bring about significant social change.

In part three, I will argue that profound societal reform can only be brought about by broad social mobilization, encompassing elements of civil society beyond the traditional bounds of NGOs.

In part four, I will examine what is needed to render human rights NGOs working in Africa more effective, not just in achieving gender equality, but also in sparking broader social reform. I will conclude that reforming the relationship between NGOs and external Western donors, rethinking the way gender inequality is conceived, and changing the way in which NGOs structure their relationship with local actors is essential to bring about sustainable and profound change.

The impetus for this essay was a twelve-week internship I completed during the summer of 2012 in Kampala, Uganda, at Refugee Law Project (RLP), an NGO founded in 1999 to provide legal aid to asylum seekers and refugees in Uganda. RLP's website states that the organization was founded because of a study that revealed that, "despite Uganda's strong international reputation for providing asylum to refugees, refugees did not always enjoy their rights in accordance with domestic and international law."

RLP is a large organization, with a staff of over fifty, including full-time, part-time and volunteer staff. Broadly speaking, RLP's work consists of leading research projects and providing legal and psychosocial assistance to Kampala's refugee population. As a law

student, I was placed in the legal department, in a unit of the department called Durable Solutions (DS). In theory, DS assists refugees seeking durable solutions in the form of resettlement, repatriation and local integration. In reality, DS serves as a default unit for any client who does not fall within the mandate of the other units of the legal and psychosocial department. This means that DS provides a wide variety of services to clients, though the main ones include assistance and support in navigating the Ugandan government's refugee determination system, administrative support for clients transferring to and from refugee settlements, and client referrals for resettlement to a Kenyan NGO called HIAS.

DS, when I arrived at RLP, was composed of my supervising lawyer, who was the head of the unit, and a woman lawyer who had been working at RLP for two months. We became three in the unit when I arrived as an intern, and soon after, a Ugandan intern was added to the team for 10 weeks. Midway through the summer, however, the woman lawyer in the unit was transferred to another unit, leaving myself, my fellow intern and my supervisor, and, once the second intern left, just myself and my supervisor. The unit was a small one in terms of staff, despite its broad mandate.

Despite my high hopes for this internship, my relationship with my supervisor fell far short of my expectations. The supervisor, a Kenyan man in his 40s who I'll call K, was overtly misogynistic and sexist in the workplace. This became evident to me very quickly, which made me extremely uncomfortable on the frequent occasions I had to interact with him. I witnessed him physically touch female colleagues on a daily basis, placing his arm on or around them or approaching his lips to the napes of their necks. I heard him make overt comments about female colleagues' appearance or attractiveness, including to a 19-year old interpreter. Because I was determined that he not engage in this type of behaviour with me, I think he perceived me as stand-offish and unwilling to engage in the flirtatious type of interaction he cultivated with the other women in our workplace. His insistence on interacting with women this way, and my discomfort with it, made our relationship extremely difficult to navigate.

My tolerance for this situation fluctuated over the summer in function of the other colleagues working in the unit and my own health, but by the end of the twelve weeks I could hardly wait for it all to be over. I was becoming increasingly more cognizant of the seriousness of the situation, largely because of an incident that occurred with K that had nothing to do with me. He was sent on a 10-day field trip to a large refugee settlement with a visiting master's student and a highly respected woman professor from the United States who specializes in refugee law. When this group returned from the field trip, the American professor was furious with K. She informed RLP management that K had spent the duration of the field trip with prostitutes each evening, consuming copious amounts of alcohol, and then oversleeping in the morning, which made it difficult for the team to get up and out into the settlement for work purposes. These allegations were confirmed by the master's student. RLP's management dealt poorly with these accusations, accusing both the American professor and the master's student of interfering with K's personal life. However, despite the seeming unwillingness of the organization to take any steps to discipline K, I felt that these allegations had provided an opening for me to express my own concerns, particularly because I knew I would be required to go through an "exit interview" at the end of my internship in order to provide feedback on my experience. Confident that what I had to say was important, I was very frank with the human resources manager who conducted the exit interview. To my surprise, he didn't seem shocked, informing me that they were aware that K had a problem with alcohol (I sometimes smelled alcohol on his breath in the mornings, another indication of how inappropriately close he would bring his face to women when speaking with them). The HR manager seemed responsive to what I had to say, assuring me that steps would be taken to deal with K and his inappropriate behaviour.

When I returned to Montreal, I spoke with my internship supervisor, informing her of the difficulties I'd had with K. Concerned that this would be an inappropriate environment for future interns, she wrote to RLP to express our discomfort in the most diplomatic of terms. Within 24 hours RLP had replied with a long and detailed email, levelling serious attacks at my character on various levels, both professional and personal. From its content I understood

that this email was the work of various colleagues, including at least one who had been a close friend throughout my twelve weeks in Uganda, or so I thought. A Canadian friend who had remained at RLP informed me that a few days later the legal department convened a meeting where they openly discussed the accusations against me that had been contained in the email.

I was deeply upset by this, and unable to understand why colleagues with whom I'd thought I had a good working relationship would turn against me so quickly and completely. The concerns my internship supervisor had expressed to RLP were couched in the gentlest of terms, confined only to K and his relationship with the women he worked with. Nowhere did we cast doubt on the capabilities of the other employees or the organization; on the contrary, we expressed confidence that RLP was more than able to take care of this situation and follow up with us.

The month following this email incident brought change. Accusations that K was known to accept both money and sexual services in exchange for legal services emerged, which drove a member of the management team to conduct an internal investigation. This investigation led to K's position finally being terminated. While I was pleased that some sort of closure had been achieved, and K would no longer be permitted to victimize his colleagues and clients at RLP, I remained heavy-hearted at the negative note on which my relationship with my former colleagues had ended. I struggled to understand their perspective. Wouldn't the fact that K had been fired lead them to question their assumptions about me? Wouldn't they see that I had been working in extremely tense conditions as K's intern? Why had they been so quick to turn on me when, in my eyes, I hadn't done anything wrong? This paper is my attempt to answer some of these questions.

Part 1. The growth of NGOs, participatory development strategies, and the empowerment of women

In the twentieth century, decolonization and globalization have meant that there has been great change in the developing world. The power of the state has declined as the power of international institutions has steadily increased. In the developing world, where the reconstruction of the state in the decolonization period was taking place, political space opened up for alternative actors to undertake various activities. As a result, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have taken on a variety of roles, implementing development and promoting human rights and social justice, activities that in the past were more often left to governmental agencies. This phenomenon has been called a “global associational revolution,” composed of a proliferation of groups operating outside the formal apparatus of the state and pursuing a variety of goals.

Many of these NGOs, in the pursuit of development goals, conduct various types of human rights work, a field in which the strategy of participatory development has become a buzzword. The participatory element of development strategies has been described as the importance of “exercising voice and choice and developing the human, organisational and management capacity to solve problems as they arise in order to sustain the improvements.” The necessity of involving primary stakeholders in development projects in order to bring about societal transformation and displace existing power structures has been recognized via participatory development orthodoxy.

In tandem with the rise of participatory development has been a significant increase in emphasis on gender equality, or gender mainstreaming. Since the 1970s, the international women’s movement has called upon international development agencies and governments to integrate women into the development process. Because of the initial lack of success of

women's projects, the notion of mainstreaming grew in popularity as a strategy to make women's issues a principal concern of development. As a result, the involvement of women in participatory development projects has been strongly emphasized by many NGOs working in the developing world. The idea that projects are unlikely to succeed without the participation of women has gained traction, leading to an emphasis on consulting and recruiting women for NGO-led development projects.

Despite this strong push for gender equality, the reality has fallen far short of the vision. Many projects seeking to involve women fail to live up to expectations, whether on the part of funders or of participants themselves. It seems that increasing the number of women involved in development projects on paper has not necessarily led to concrete benefits to the women themselves. This problem is particularly acute in the African context, where gender equality has proven to be a difficult goal to achieve for many development projects.

Part 2. Gender inequality in the African context

Gender inequality is a deep-rooted element of many African societies, which renders achieving gender equality as an element of development projects a difficult goal. In various African communities, religious faith and traditional cultural values are intertwined with the basic fabric of society, perspectives which are not always compatible with notions of gender equality advanced by international NGOs. The values embodied by the Christian church often appear even more oppositional to gender equality movements than traditional non-religious African values. As a result, there are ideological, religious, and cultural systems underlying gender inequality, which makes genuine reform challenging to achieve. To highlight Uganda as an example, a comprehensive study carried out by the World Bank on gender inequality in the country showed that there is a marked gender gap in control

over resources and decision-making power, to the detriment of women, as well as a gap in labour burdens, with women bearing a disproportionate responsibility for meeting needs in the family context. The study concluded that “the implications of these gender-based differences are far-reaching and intertwined in complex and multi-dimensional ways that affect virtually every aspect of life.”

This deep-seated gender inequality makes the integration of gender equality into NGO mandates more complex than it may seem at first glance. Furthermore, gender mainstreaming projects are generally imposed by external sources on NGOs in Africa, which leads to a gap between the mandate of these organizations and the realities of the local actors involved in the projects. This dichotomy is generally rooted in the relationship between donors and NGOs.

For many donors, gender mainstreaming has become a high priority on the list of development goals, driven by the belief that sustainable change can only be brought about when women are involved in development projects. As a result, donors make their funding conditional on gains in gender equality, without a thorough analysis of the conditions and context in which the project is taking place. This means that the difficulties of making gender mainstreaming an integral element of a development project are not fully considered, rendering the project less effective. Furthermore, local NGOs, cognizant that many donors are imposing gender equality goals via funding conditionalities, incorporate gender equality into their funding proposals without an understanding of what is required, or even without the intention to work towards such a goal.

The disconnect between principles of gender equality and the reality of the societies within which NGOs are operating in Africa leads to various problems with implementation, including lethargy, scepticism, misunderstanding, and/or active resistance to these ideas. Local actors may view gender mainstreaming projects as impositions by external actors, not

feeling any ownership over the resultant projects. The emphasis on gender mainstreaming is perceived as “misunderstanding the essence of African societies.

Further, because of the lack of understanding of ideas about gender equality, local communities may perceive these projects and principles as a threat to men and male power. Because of the traditionally patriarchal nature of many African societies, gender mainstreaming projects are viewed as culturally inappropriate, and therefore hard to implement because of their lack of relevance to local realities.

A further misunderstanding of local realities is demonstrated by the often uniform approaches taken to addressing gender equality despite the complexity of the societies in question. Standardised, quick workshops are used in an attempt to change attitudes and practices in short timeframes. These approaches are often ineffective because they ignore the time-consuming processes necessary to change long-held local beliefs and practices. Because of the complex set of factors generating and sustaining gender inequality, the approach to gender mainstreaming taken by NGOs must be very carefully thought out and adapted to the local context. However, as will be explained below, this is often not how projects are carried out.

Part 3. The reproduction of gender inequality in NGOs

NGOs have been acknowledged by many experts as an important force in the development process, providing an important alternative to the state in various circumstances. The institutional weaknesses developing countries face have been mitigated by NGOs, which can step into these vacuums not only to provide important services, but also to militate for social change. In East Africa, NGOs have accounted for the most critical voices against the state, playing a leading role in struggling to open up political space.

However, the achievements by and potential of NGOs has been in the face of great challenges. East African states, in particular, have adopted hostile and coercive policies against human rights NGOs, with the Ugandan government closely regulating NGOs and seeking to either co-opt or muzzle them. NGOs are also vulnerable to problems endemic to other institutions, including the shift in organizational culture from democratic-style rule to oligarchy.

Furthermore, challenges have arisen around participatory development strategies. The ethos of NGO participatory development projects has come to take as a given the participation of local actors, a strategy which is understood to build the strength of civil society. However, this approach is often instituted without close scrutiny of power relationships among the groups that compose civil society. The fact that NGOs working with local actors are, in some ways, rooted in local cultures means that staff reflect the gender relations prevalent in their society, and “find it hard to combat these internally, as well as in their work with communities.” The phenomenon of the reproduction of local power hierarchies within the context of NGOs has been well-documented, leading to questions of whether NGOs are doomed to repeat the patterns of societies from which they emerge, empowering but simultaneously victimizing. In many instances, NGOs fail to live up to their own rhetoric of egalitarianism and empowerment. RLP’s hiring of, and reluctance to fire, an abusive male member of its staff is a clear example of an NGO unwilling or unable to counteract the power relationships present in Ugandan society, despite the organization’s very explicit focus on gender and sexuality as part of its mandate.

The constraints on NGOs make clear that there are severe limitations on these organizations’ ability to bring about significant social change. Not only do they face external constraints in the form of hostile or lethargic state governments, but they also face internal constraints in the form of deep-rooted and unequal societal power relationships. In the face

of such constraints, how can NGOs go about developing effective strategies to work towards gender equality?

The difficulties gender mainstreaming projects have faced due to hostility towards these projects because of their imposition by external donor forces suggests that broader local mobilization may be more effective. Thomas Carothers has reminded us that civil society does not consist solely of NGOs, but rather consists of a myriad of non-state organizations and associations. There seems to be potential for change in other sectors of civil society, which may be more rooted in local culture and society than many NGOs, and therefore better able to understand the necessity for the harmonization of activism with local mindsets.

The potential for change brought about by a broader civil society movement has already been recognized. Makau Mutua has highlighted the capacity for civil society to act as a socially transformative agent in East Africa, building on the fast-growing nascent civil society movement that exists already in the region. Mutua argues that the role of civil society is essential in the African context because of the failure of political parties to lead the reconstitution of the political order in the post-colonial period. While historically the role of civil society in established democracies has been to keep the state honest and accountable, African civil society must do even more because of the conditions in which it is operating, creating the conditions for democracy, and therefore acting as a key agent for democratization.

Where in civil society we can look for powerful social movements is a more difficult question. NGOs, while playing important roles in shaping policy, fostering citizen participation, and providing leadership training, are outweighed by more traditional parts of civil society like religious organizations, labour unions, and other groups which generally have a genuine base in the local population and may work with domestic sources of funding,

which, as already discussed, many international human rights NGOs lack, particularly in the developing world. Because of the power of sectors of civil society such as religious organizations and labour unions, the involvement of these groups is essential in order to achieve significant shifts in societal values. These groups can be more effective in their work because of the connections they hold to societies, and the way in which their strategies are more rooted in local traditions and culture.

In the context of the refugee population in Kampala, for example, one of the main sources of relief and assistance is churches. Despite this fact, RLP does not explicitly work with any local churches in order to supplement its legal assistance program. Building alliances with religious organizations could create a very powerful local base for human rights NGOs. Certainly, the patriarchal attitudes of many religious figures and institutions would have to be confronted and dealt with, but the resulting dialogue and collaboration could contain the seeds for greater change.

Furthermore, these diverse elements of civil society, in their more grassroots character, can be contrasted to NGOs, which tend to be dominated and run by elites. This elite leadership often has very thin ties to the local populations on whose behalf they claim to act. Rather, they tend to maintain strong connections with external funding sources, and are unable to cultivate funding from local sources. The often elitist and aristocratic nature of NGO leadership further alienates them from their client populations.

The picture being painted is of NGOs run by disconnected wealthy elites with strong ties to external donors, to the point where their agendas are often set by these donors without consideration for the needs and desires of local society. In many ways, this serves as an accurate depiction of the situation at RLP. The current director is of British origin, and has been running the organization for six years. Coming from a research background, though his intentions might be good, he spends the majority of his time attending international

conferences and colloquia, and focusing on RLP publications. How rooted in local society can someone like that really be? Try as he may, he was not born or raised in Uganda, nor even on the African continent, and spends very little time there as a result of the demands on his time as the director. Inevitably, it would seem, there will be a disconnect between his approach and a more grassroots local approach.

There are both internal and external constraints on an African movement towards gender equality- internal in the form of resistance by local actors due to both local culture and religion, as well as hostile or resistant attitudes towards movements perceived as inherently Western; and external in the form of Western NGOs disconnected from the local cultures they're working in and dominated by both Western and local elites.

V. The path towards gender equality

These conclusions, while shedding light on the limitations on NGOs as agents for change, leave open the question as to how a movement towards gender equality can be brought about in the African context. While the potential power of a broader civil society movement provides hope, it does not provide a roadmap as to what kind of strategy may be more effective in promoting gender equality.

There are two essential elements to a reformed civil society movement with the potential to bring about significant change in respect to gender equality. First, the relationship between civil society and (mostly Western) donors is in dire need of reform. As discussed earlier, NGOs working in Africa are largely funded by Western donors who contribute to setting their agendas and developing their vision. This has caused such a disconnect between the organizations claiming to work for the people and the people themselves that the work these NGOs are doing is losing effectiveness. Only by restructuring funding arrangements and looking for alternate sources of funding will NGOs be able to re-

root themselves in the societies in which they are working in order to build up their legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

The second, and possibly more difficult element, involves a change in the way gender inequality and the participation of women is conceived. This involves not only reforming the way women are involved in participatory development work, but also a initiating a deeper inquiry into the patriarchal and misogynistic societal structures that have traditionally excluded women.

The relationship between NGOs, civil society, and donors

Virtually all East African NGOs are wholly funded by external, and usually Western, donors. This external funding renders NGOs vulnerable to the desires and needs of their donors, and leads to constant jockeying to maintain and increase this funding. As a result, NGOs are often unwilling to advocate positions that may go against the vision of the agency whose funding they are dependent on.

This dependence on foreign funding has had a detrimental effect on the vision and direction of human rights NGOs working in the region. Betty Murungi has lamented that the biggest problem facing NGOs in Africa is their lack of a clear mandate and vision. Heavy dependence on Western funding has severely limited the space within which African NGOs can work. Mutua has identified the link between the explosion of human rights NGOs in East Africa to the rise of the Western-based human rights movement, warning that this Western human rights discourse has taken over the local human rights movement, rendering it largely devoid of ideological and conceptual originality.

Why is this Western human rights discourse so problematic in the African context? In order to be effective, human rights NGOs need to cultivate legitimacy in morality,

knowledge, performance and politics. However, a lack of financial and ideological independence has meant that African NGOs have generally failed to engage with the issues most important to the society within which they are working, causing them to lose both relevance and legitimacy. Western and Northern NGOs tend to focus on political human rights, whereas Global South civil society organizations place more of an emphasis on social human rights. Connie Ngondi-Houghton has lamented the pursuit by African NGOs of Western neoliberal values at the expense of socioeconomic issues.

Because Western donors often hold a great deal of power, however, they have played a large role in setting NGOs agendas, such that local communities feel that their concerns are not reflected by the visions and mandates of these organizations. Murungi has warned of the feelings of alienation that can be caused by such a structure. Furthermore, as discussed in part I, Western donors make the empowerment of women a high priority, demanding adherence to a certain agenda of gender equality despite a lack of readiness or willingness on the part of NGOs to address this issue, or a lack of understanding as to how to go about implementing such an agenda.

It has also been argued that implanting a Western vision on an African NGO can lead to the transfer of Western concepts of civil society onto other cultures, which can weaken the effectiveness of the strategies developed by these organizations.

A further problem is the creation of an NGO elite as a result of Western funding structures, which was already alluded to in section II. Local ownership tends to be easily discounted, and local actors more familiar with Western ways of conducting human rights work are often favoured because of their understanding of and willingness to implement Western-style development practices. This phenomenon encourages the creation of patterns of subordination and dominance, which, while always a risk within organizations, is even more likely when funding is linked to foreign sources.

The disconnect between the mandate and visions of NGOs and the people they are working for makes it evident that reform is necessary on many levels. The most important direction this reform should take is an increased level of independence of NGOs from their Western donors. One obvious, yet possibly difficult to implement, strategy is for NGOs to cultivate stronger local moral and financial support for their work. Currently, Africa-based NGOs frequently work from a very thin base of local support. By drawing more strongly upon local funding sources, NGOs would be encouraged to draw their vision from local actors, meeting the needs of the local community.

Not only must NGOs root themselves more thoroughly in local culture financially, but they must also build stronger cultural links to local society. This would involve tailoring their work more specifically to the African context in order to build real support in the community, moving towards a stronger emphasis on economic and social rights and issues. Mutua has argued that this can only be done if the human rights movement on the African continent is re-oriented, drawing its staff from local universities and think-tanks. He warns that this is the only way African NGOs can avoid a “paralyzing crisis of legitimacy.” While this may sound like a dramatic conclusion, Mutua’s argument can be understood in softer terms. As Africa-based NGOs continue to focus on issues chosen by their Western donors, the societies in which they are working are further and further alienated from these organizations. As a result, their work loses effectiveness, making them redundant.

RLP serves as an example of this phenomenon of a drift from the community in the form of the work it conducts with its client population. A narrow focus on refugees’ legal rights, without any socioeconomic support for clients in dire need of basic services such as food and shelter assistance, has begun to alienate clients. The frustration of client asylum-seekers who are only able to procure sheaves of legal documents permeates the workplace, creating a palpable disconnect between the organization’s employees and its clients.

Furthermore, NGOs must reform in other ways to tailor their work to the context in which they are working. In societies where corruption and nepotism are endemic, an emphasis on democratic decision-making processes in the workplace may be misplaced. Rather, an emphasis on accountability and transparency in decision-making and the execution of policies would be more appropriate to the context. This is, again, reflected to some extent by the example of RLP, which attempts in various ways to be democratic in its decision-making processes. Weekly meetings are held where the entire staff are brought up to speed on the goings-on of the organization, and permitted to express their thoughts or opinions about the work that is being done.

However, from my perspective as an intern, there were very few checks and balances in place to ensure accountability and transparency. The systems in place can be, and frequently are, ignored by employees because of a lack of oversight. Accusations of fraud in respect to resettlement referrals have been brought forward in the past by clients, yet recent revelations indicate that fraud still occurs. When difficulties arose in the organization, it was unclear who would take charge to deal with these problems. Without transparency and accountability, NGOs end up with corrupt management structures, resulting in subverted funding, power abuses, and other severe problems. The organizational structures in place are clearly not working, and are badly in need of reform.

The perception of women's participation and gender inequality in the African context

One strategy that may need to be rethought is participatory development. This development strategy is generally based on a model emphasising consensus and common priorities. While this may seem, at first glance, like a powerful model for change, the picture changes when the power relationships among participants are taken into account. Furthermore, not only are power politics at play, but consensus may be a poor model when

needs and priorities for different groups are radically different, as can often be the case between men and women.

As a result, the notion of participation needs to be rethought in order to achieve a more genuine consensus. As it stands, participation is based on inequalities in resources and power between participants, which influences the aims and forms of participation, particularly for women. As a result, women's participation risks being determined by male priorities, a phenomenon which is often reinforced by women who have internalized gender inequality and are therefore instrumental in enforcing gender roles and inequalities. In addition, while men may express support for female participation in development projects, this cannot be blindly accepted as evidence that they are fully supportive of gender equality, and more particularly, willing to forgo their own perceived positions of power for a more equitable distribution of power.

An approach needs to be taken that renders women a more active element of the development process, making them agents of change rather than passive objects upon which development is conducted. If women are genuinely empowered, they may be able to contribute to a process that responds to their own analyses and aspirations. By involving women more thoroughly in development projects, they can create projects and programs that respond to their needs through processes of negotiation and consultation. The outcome can be a range of forms of participation for women, tailored to their needs, circumstances, and goals.

Moreover, as discussed earlier, gender mainstreaming initiatives are often imposed on African NGOs by external donors, creating a disconnect between the culture of the local actors and the strategy and goals of the organization. This disconnect often means that women are not permitted to define their own needs. They are told what gender equality consists of, rather than being involved in the process of discussing their own lived

experiences and the goals they would like to achieve. Not every woman everywhere has the same vision of gender equality.

A more effective strategy of empowerment would be created by involving women and allowing them to use their subjective experience to create gender mainstreaming strategies. William Fisher argues that a way in which human rights NGOs can further women's empowerment is through politicising previously depoliticized realms and issues, by taking subjective experience and making it into sites of political contestation. The identity politics that result from this process contribute to an emancipatory process, empowering women by allowing them to maintain their autonomy and reducing their susceptibility to cooptation and colonization. This emancipatory space would create the opportunity for women to further their own vision of gender equality.

Another element of development projects which must be rethought in order to make gender mainstreaming effective is the organizational culture of NGOs. Often NGOs implement gender mainstreaming initiatives at a very fast pace, eager to conform to donor objectives in order to secure funding. However, the rapidity of this implementation has meant that NGO staff and communities are not given time to internalize or understand the idea of gender equality and its associated concepts. These short time-frames are simply impracticable once it is acknowledged that changes in knowledge and attitudes take a long time to achieve, necessitating shifts in deeply-held cultural beliefs and practices. Key to these changes is time spent creating space for local actors to value the ideas in question and feel some sense of ownership over them.

Moreover, it must be acknowledged that merely involving a certain number of women in development projects cannot be seen as the achievement of gender equality. Other factors will render this sort of numerical participation meaningless, such as gender

inequalities in resources, time availability, and the power balance of traditionally gendered roles.

The need to broaden the vision of gender equality from the narrow approach of tallying up numbers of women and men involved in a project is indicative of the need to address the more subtle, and deep-rooted ways in which gender inequality permeates society. The compilation of statistics on women's involvement in development projects is a superficial vision of gender equality. While it may be possible to find instances in which women, statistically, appear to be as involved as men, this participation may consist of women assuming roles in activities which present the least threat to men's traditional roles. This sort of participation does nothing to change underlying prejudices or power imbalances, however. In order to bring about deeper reform of strongly patriarchal society structures, an "explicitly and uncompromisingly pro-woman" stance must be taken, which includes addressing underlying inequalities which limit the degree to which women can benefit from involvement in participatory projects.

In order to provoke this sort of change, the notion of what equality really means in the African context must be further explored, which involves exploration of the subordination of women and the traditional patriarchy and misogyny so engrained in some African societies. Sylvia Tamale argues that in this process, NGOs have failed to address the intersection between law, sexuality and gender. The difficulty of addressing such issues arises from two sources: the socially conservative politics of the region, and the traditional patriarchy of Abrahamic faiths, which was alluded to in part II. These elements of African societies make the issue of misogyny and gender inequality extremely sensitive, causing development organizations to sidestep such issues for fear of igniting a backlash against their work. However, without addressing these fundamental elements of society, significant change cannot be brought about. The marginalization of women because of their gender and sexuality must be confronted head-on by NGOs seeking to empower women, argues

Tamale. This open interrogation of patriarchy and misogyny has the potential not only to cause society to rethink its marginalization of women, but also to draw out issues of the marginalization of the GLBTQ community as well.

The bigger picture: A people-driven human rights NGO culture

The need for a different approach to achieving gender equality in the African context is not an isolated problem. Rather, regardless of what social reform an NGO may be pursuing, their conception of civil society needs to be reformed. The public interest is a highly contested domain, where different visions of the public good are put forward by different groups. These visions may come into conflict or overlap. In this context, single-issue NGOs may miss the opportunity to identify shifting societal movements in their myopic pursuit of their own narrow goals. Struggles within civil society provide an opportunity for change as traditionally accepted notions may become subject to contestation and debate. It is the work of human rights NGOs to identify these contested spaces and use them to advocate for change, participating in the reform that civil society is driving, rather than importing ideas from external sources that are foreign to the evolution of local civil society. To again take gender equality as an example, the way NGOs build relationships with local activists working on this issue must be changed. Working with local NGOs and communities will improve the acceptance and implementation of new policies and practices by rooting these new concepts in local culture. What can then be generated is what Mutua has called a “socially organic, people-driven human rights NGO culture,” a movement which will hold much more potential for change than the current human rights NGO movement in Africa.

Building relationships with local communities

While it may seem facile to call for stronger relationships with local communities, the question remains as to how this can be done. Sally Engle Merry provides a comprehensive answer to this question in an essay she published in 2006. Merry argues that human rights language is drawn from the universal and then adapted to local communities, a process she refers to as “framing,” a term developed to identify what makes an idea persuasive to a social movement. Frames are created not by changing the essence of ideas themselves, but rather by adapting the way in which they are presented or packaged. The frame is the way in which ideas can be represented in specific cultural terms, “resonant with cultural traditions and narratives. Merry acknowledges that this approach presents an inherent challenge- by presenting human rights principles in a way that makes them compatible with local ways of thinking, these ideas risk losing their power for change. “It is only their capacity to challenge existing power relations that offers radical possibilities.”

There are a few different ways to address this challenge of framing a human rights idea without stripping it of its potency. Merry offers one herself, identifying the need for translators: people “who have one foot in the local community and one foot in the activist/ NGO community.” These are people who, by virtue of being well-versed not only in human rights discourse, but also in the cultural norms of the context in which they are working, are able to “negotiate the middle in a field of power and opportunity.” In a way Merry’s translators address the issue of external donor funding by using the language of international human rights to procure funding and media attention, while simultaneously framing human rights ideas in ways that are acceptable to the local community. It seems worthwhile to point out that while this may sound like a good idea in theory, the reality of finding such translators, able to dart so deftly between disparate worlds, may not be so easy. Would such intermediaries be able to maintain the necessary arms length from powerful Western donors, preventing them from defining the agendas and priorities of African NGOs?

While it is important to question the ease with which such a balance can be struck, maybe in Merry's vision of the translator straddling two worlds lies the answer to the dilemma as to where local funding can be sought for African NGOs. While exclusively local funding may create the space needed for a truly local civil society movement to be effective, the reality of such a proposal is doubtful at this point in time. If we accept that, at least in the near future, external funding will be necessary in order for human rights NGOs to continue their work in Africa, the question becomes how to navigate these funding arrangements. Merry provides the beginnings of an answer, stressing the importance of actors capable of navigating the world of international human rights and Western donors, while remaining firmly grounded in local culture.

When Merry's ideas are considered in relation to Mutua's critique of African NGOs, a clearer picture emerges. Mutua's emphasis on drawing NGO leaders from local institutions such as universities and think tanks answers the question of who can play the role of Merry's translators. Building local capacity by using local leaders will ensure that NGO leaders are more in touch with the needs and desires of local populations.

It must be borne in mind that using translators in order to appropriately frame human rights principles for local communities is insufficient. As Mutua has argued, and as my RLP experience demonstrates, corruption and a lack of accountability are also endemic problems. The principles of transparency and accountability must be incorporated alongside local actors, even if this comes at the expense of democratic organizational structures.

Finally, given these changes in NGO structure and composition, it must be expected that the paths these organizations will take will not necessarily resemble those that NGOs operating in other contexts may take. As discussed above, Merry warns that making human rights compatible with local thinking risks preventing them from inducing change. They will merely maintain the capacity to challenge existing power relations. It is here, however, where

the true potential for change lies. A more open discussion of deep underlying misogyny and patriarchy is necessary to move towards gender equality in the African context. The first step is discussion, and the challenging of formerly accepted notions around gender. The key is to create contested spaces, providing the opportunity for local actors to use these openings to provoke further discussion and initiate change. In this way, the choice for how that change will be framed and in what direction it will be guided is left to those most impacted.

The role of the state

A discussion of social reform is not complete without acknowledgement of the role of the state. While civil society can and should challenge the state, these two elements of society need each other to a large degree, and, ideally, develop in tandem. To state the obvious, civil society groups will have more success influencing state policy if the state has coherent powers for setting and enforcing policy, while a weak state can greatly hinder civil society movements. The state can also take concrete steps to make the NGO sector more effective, such as establishing clear regulatory frameworks, creating tax incentives for the funding of nonprofit groups, and developing measures to increase transparency. Furthermore, it is questionable how effective strong grassroots movements can be in affecting change if reform is not also affected on a state level. While the discussion above has focused on changing people's worldview, it does little good for this to happen if there are not corresponding shifts in state structures and institutions. This need for state responsiveness is obvious in the context of gender equality- shifting societal mindsets towards gender must be accompanied by concerted state efforts to empower women at the state level in order to render this sort of change effective and sustainable.

The lesson to be learned from the importance of the state is that NGOs, while remaining independent to as a great a degree as possible, must remain flexible enough to collaborate with the state when necessary, developing policy that reflects grassroots change.

Conclusion

The internal investigation that occurred at RLP in the wake of the revelations about my supervisor, K, was led by a Ugandan manager at the organization, a very charismatic, well-respected woman leader in the refugee law community in Kampala. It is my hope that the discussions around this investigation, and the subsequent decision to terminate K's employment, provided the space for other women at the organization to voice concerns they may have had, particularly because the investigation was led by a woman. The acknowledgement that the traditional patriarchy in such an organization is not untouchable could provide the impetus for some questioning of power structures. While I am not naïve enough to believe that this one incident will provoke a complete shift in the hierarchies at the organization, I do believe that it is a step in the right organization. There is potential for change if a reformed approach is taken to advancing the cause of gender equality. Though the change will be gradual, it might actually be sustainable.

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