

“Please Don’t Use the Word Gender.”

David Kelleher

We were in Addis Ababa. This was our first team meeting in a two year gender equality project. Our organization, Gender at Work had been contracted to work with six organizations from across the Horn of Africa to help them improve their capacity to deliver services in a more gender equitable way. The organizations were partners of Oxfam Canada’s PACE program. Now, the local PACE manager, Mahlet, was telling us not to use the word “gender”. I asked respectfully, why she thought that, but at the same time I was thinking, wait a minute, gender is how we think about this problem; gender is central to all our concepts and frameworks. How else will we talk about it? Fear made a quiet appearance in my body.

Mahlet explained that the word “gender” was not well received by local development organizations. It was a word used by urban feminists who were seen as western-influenced and not understanding of local or regional cultural norms.

This discussion had arisen as we were talking about the first meetings with the organizations we would be working with. The conversation went on to how will we talk about “it” without using the word gender. What are we trying to do here anyway?

Amel, a Sudanese consultant reminded us how important it was not to impose western frameworks. I understood that but at the same time, if we don’t use “western” frameworks, what will we use? And, I’m not sure they are “western”; women all over the world demand their rights.

We agreed to develop a way of working that was culturally sensitive. We agreed that we would start our meetings with the organizations by simply asking, “How are women and men’s lives different here?” We would just listen to how people within this culture understood relationships between men and women.

In our other meetings and conversations in Addis and then with Ethiopian and Sudanese organizations, I began to realize that culture was experienced differently here from other places I had worked in Africa and Asia. In this region, people were very knowledgeable about how culture inhibited change toward gender equality and they were committed to women’s rights but they also treasured their culture. It was not just something to be changed—it was a deeply valued part of their makeup. They did not want to “challenge oppressive cultural norms” as my colleagues do in other parts of the world. They wanted to make changes within the culture and they wanted to make changes in a way, which didn’t alienate people, or create divisions in the community.

My own culture is much more atomistic—we are comfortable with good guys and bad guys, being separate from families and communities; in fact, many would say that to be a

change agent you have to be willing to separate yourself from the mainstream. In the Horn of Africa, I met people who were committed to community, family, culture and change for women's rights.

One organization we worked with, GAVO, was founded by a group of young men in Somaliland after the civil war. It began with a focus on mental illness on the advice of their spiritual advisor. Some 15 years later as GAVO was thinking about how to be more gender equitable in a very traditional society, it didn't define the conservative cultural and spiritual leaders as "blocks to change" but engaged them in discussions about how a concern for women and girls could enrich the community and be "within the culture". As Farhan, the Executive Director put it, "We will learn about gender together with the community".

I think this is the most powerful lesson I learned from our friends and colleagues in the Horn of Africa. Real change for gender equality comes from a deep engagement with the whole community particularly those who we might think would be least open to these ideas. This keeps us from the temptation to see those who disagree with us as misguided, sexist, prejudiced and therefore somehow less than us and not worth the dialogue. I think this devaluing of others sometimes covers up a fear that true dialogue will reveal that our cherished beliefs are not completely right either. There is an ego here that finds defense in the devaluing of those who disagree with us.

What this means is that we can't go into the dialogue convinced we are right and the others must agree. The appropriate (locally relevant) truth will be found in the dialogue. This is a big step away from the certainty of frameworks and the belief that success means the project will come to some predetermined ends. The projects in the Horn were all wonderful surprises. The coffee ceremonies in Dire Dawa, the Home Peace program in Wau, the expeditions to remote villages in Upper Nile were all unpredictable at the beginning of the project. They all advanced women's rights but they grew out of the energy, commitment and cultural sensitivity of the partners not from our frameworks as to what constitutes gender equality.

The difficulty is that by not having pre-determined signposts with which to judge the projects we are forced to make judgments not from outside in the comfort of our frameworks and previous understandings. We are forced to judge the projects in their own terms. We cannot rely on an evaluation method to reassure us that our judgments are accurate and dependable. We need to bring an analysis that is perhaps akin to the psychotherapist's clinical judgment rather than the social scientist's objective one.