

Action Learning for Gender Equality The Gender at Work Approach

This program was created to help organizations change their organizations and their programs to become more gender equitable. The program was built on an understanding of *action learning* and an integral, holistic understanding of gender equality and women's empowerment that over the past 14 years has resulted in impressive changes in a variety of NGOs in South Asia, South Africa and, most recently, the Horn of Africa region.

Action learning is a process that has been part of private sector strategies for leadership development and to a lesser extent organization development for many years. (Reg Revans wrote a review of 25 years of experience in 1980!) The main features of the method are:

- A small group analyzes and develops solutions to a real organizational problem
- It is expected that participants will learn from each other as they work on a real problem
- People will learn how to ask questions that will bring unstated assumptions to the surface
- People will learn about themselves as they work on a problem together
- People are accountable for their decisions and are expected to implement them.
- There is a process of analyzing results and learning from experience.

These core ideas have been used in a variety of ways to stimulate learning on the part of individuals and to also improve the effectiveness of organizations.

At Gender at Work, our focus has been on individual and organizational change to further gender equality. From the beginning, we realized we needed to provide an educational experience that would change how organizations deliver services so that those services benefit women as well as men and that they contribute to women's empowerment. We also realized that the organization itself needed to become more capable and willing to do work on gender equality and women's empowerment. A study we conducted of 18 Indian social change organizations led us to the idea of "reflective space". We talked with these organizations about their efforts to grow and develop and improve their services to women. Almost all reported there was no reflective space for them to come together with others they trusted to think issues through and design new approaches.

Accordingly, we developed a process to support peer-learning space that enabled action. That reflective space had at least 4 aspects:

1. The organizational visit—a reflection on history, existing program, readiness for change and the reasonable next step. In all cases participants felt energized and engaged in the problem of how they could take their work for gender equality to the next step. In one case, in particular, they came away from this meeting quite challenged by how they had been working and determined to expand their focus.
2. The peer learning workshops allowed the participants space to think, plan and to get supportive feedback from facilitators and peer organizations.
3. The peer learning workshops also built a social group that supported participants personal explorations related to the work. The peer group also brought a sense

of accountability. Participants were determined to have something to share at the next meeting.

4. The Gender at Work facilitators brought experience, relevant ideas and a supportive ear to the on-going process of implementing the plans