

# GEXcel Work in Progress Report Volume X

Proceedings from GEXcel Theme 11–12:  
Gender Paradoxes in Changing Academic  
and Scientific Organisation(s)

Edited by  
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Centre of Gendering Excellence – GEXcel

**Towards a European Centre of Excellence in  
Transnational and Transdisciplinary Studies of**

- Changing Gender Relations
- Intersectionalities
- Embodiment

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# Chapter 12

## The 'Bifocal Approach': (Re)Positioning Women's Programs

*Jennifer De Vries*

One of the welcome tasks associated with my GEXcel research project has been meeting with Swedish gender and organisation scholars whose work I have admired from afar or caught glimpses of in conference presentations or proceedings. Only a small proportion of this scholarship has been published in English language journals and the opportunity to meet and discuss theory and practice personally has been a highlight.

I knew that I was amongst scholars of a similar ilk when at my first meeting the Professor present noted in passing 'we would call that a mixed gender program'. She was referring to the use of male and female mentors in a program where women were targeted as the mentees. In the Australian context, and indeed in many other European contexts where I have presented my work, these programs, even when men are engaged as mentors in the program, continue to be referred to as 'women only' programs because the intended beneficiaries of the program were the women, not the mentors. The majority of programs are so firmly stuck within the 'fix the women' paradigm that the inclusion of senior men and women as mentors remains incidental and the potential that their intentional inclusion could bring remains unexplored and unutilised.

In large part my doctoral research explored the re-orientation of women only programs away from this women as deficit approach, towards becoming vehicles for building more gender equitable workplaces. In a mentoring context this re-orientation includes working with male and female mentors to develop their gender insight and activism, in order to engage them as leaders in the organisational gender change process. This inclusion of the mentors as intended beneficiaries in the program design, therefore changing it from a women only program into a mixed gender program, was apparently assumed by the scholars present at that first meeting, and seen as unremarkable.

I left that meeting feeling like I had, at least in terms of my contribution, 'taken coals to Newcastle'. Originally a British idiom used to describe a pointless action, as coal was produced in Newcastle, it works equally well from an Australian perspective as we also mine coal in Newcastle, just north of Sydney. Despite this, there is something comforting about arriving at the same place, via a different journey, through build-

ing on the shared tradition of the work of scholars such as Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) and Joan Acker (1990, 1992). Like familiar friends they were the known gems listed in bibliographies, alongside the tantalisingly unknowable (written in) Swedish entries. While Swedish scholars were able to build on a rich vein of Scandinavian scholarship ‘within the so called doing gender perspective in organisation research’ (Gunnarsson et al 2003: 6), I in turn, built on the work of others, most particularly scholars associated with the Centre for Gender in Organizations<sup>1</sup> (see, for example, Meyerson and Fletcher 2000) using these same foundational scholars. Using common foundations we were all engaged in exploring ‘how the use of gender theory can contribute to deeper, sustainable gender equality’ (Amundsdotter 2009: 1).

Paradoxically, bringing coals to Newcastle may be of value, if the journey and next steps can be shared and collaborations formed. In the interests of engaging further in this conversation I will outline a little of the journey that brought me to the meeting where so much of what I had learnt along the way was already understood.

## The ‘bifocal approach’: Re-positioning women’s programs

My thesis, titled *A realistic agenda? Women only programs as strategic interventions for building gender equitable workplaces*<sup>2</sup> examined the capacity of a women only (WO) leadership development program to move beyond a sole focus on developing the women, to become a transformative gendered change intervention.

Playing on the notion of bifocal spectacles, I coined the term, the ‘bifocal approach’ to emphasise the necessity of maintaining a simultaneous focus on individual *and* organisational change. The bifocal approach became a way of operationalising a transformative agenda specific to WO programs to keep both foci clearly in view. The on-going challenge was to design these two foci into the program curriculum, design and implementation to become simultaneous, interdependent and compatible goals. Maintaining two foci effectively becomes a pairing of what Cynthia Cockburn refers to as the short or limited agenda of ‘equality

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1 Researchers associated with the Centre for Gender in Organizations (CGO), Simmons Graduate School, Boston, include Gill Coleman, Robin Ely, Joyce Fletcher, Deborah Kolb, Debra Meyerson, Rhona Rapoport, Ann Ripplin and Maureen Scully. See also the special ‘Beyond Armchair Feminism’ edition of *Organization*, vol. 7, no. 4, for a critical overview of their work.

2 [http://repository.uwa.edu.au:80/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=13090&current\\_base=GEN01-INS01](http://repository.uwa.edu.au:80/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=13090&current_base=GEN01-INS01)

for individual women' with the longer agenda of a '*project of transformation* for organizations' (Cockburn 1989: 218, original emphasis). By pairing WO development with the transformative agenda, the bifocal approach opportunistically aims to build on an existing intervention.

I argued that WO programs offered potential advantages as a platform for an organisational gender change intervention in addressing commonly experienced difficulties with transformative interventions (Rao, Stuart and Kelleher 1999): organisational access and the way the radical transformative agenda was 'sold' to the organisation; the process of engagement with organisational partners; and, making the intervention robust and sustainable. WO programs provide a different organisational rationale for a gendered change agenda; with the seeming palatability of WO programs (Devos, McLean and O'Hara 2003), as evidenced by their continuing popularity, easing organisational access. WO programs have the capacity to be on-going, repeated year after year, while providing opportunities for partnership building with a diversity of organisational members at all levels, including senior men (as mentors and champions).

The critical work of the bifocal approach focussed around these partnership building opportunities, seeking to facilitate organisational members' development of gender insight through their program involvement. The development of gender insight was considered necessary to underpin engagement in the work of transforming the gendered organisation. LDW was seeking to recruit, using the words of Deborah Kolb (2003), 'constituencies for change'.

## Examining the effectiveness of the 'bifocal approach'

My research examined the 'bifocal approach' as applied by the Leadership Development for Women program (LDW) delivered in two historically masculinist institutions, the University of Western Australia and a policing organisation. Qualitative data from the three potential constituency groups that form the heart of the bifocal approach – executive level champions of the program, senior female and male mentors, and the female participants – was used to examine the effectiveness of the bifocal approach.

The difficulty of developing gender insight and agency became increasingly obvious as each new group (executive leaders, mentors and participants, in that order) was examined. Yet with each group there were individuals, always only a small minority of the potentially large group, who engaged with the gendered change agenda. I will illustrate this with a few examples, firstly drawn from the mentor and then participant interviews.

‘[A]nd gender, if it has relevance...’, the words of Clive, a male Professor, became symbolically representative of much of the mentor interview material in both organisations. Male and female mentors largely lacked a critical lens to examine their own organisation, and this impeded their development of gender insight. Interviews were marked by a degree of complacency and overly optimistic assessments of progress made towards gender equality. These were out of step with the institutional data and the experience of the more junior female participants on the program. Most at UWA considered it a ‘good place for women to work’ and not ‘anti-female in any way’. Police mentors focussed on how far they had come, with the most enthusiastic endorsement of progress coming from Simon, a Superintendent, who stated ‘we have gone ahead in leaps and bounds...’. What emerged in the interviews were many ways of diminishing and denying the importance of gender as an organisational issue, reducing systemic gendering processes to problems that individual women could address. The focus of the mentoring relationship became assisting women to more closely fit the ‘ideal worker’ in order to succeed within the defined masculine parameters of the role. Mentors, in large part remained unchanged by their mentoring experience, learning little from their exposure to the stories of women within their organisation.

Trevor, an Inspector in policing provided the exception. Trevor’s approach was marked by a thoughtful questioning of the status quo within his organisation, combined with a capacity to speak up and challenge assumptions and practices when he considered it was important to do so. He brought what he described as a healthy cynicism to his role as mentor, and was open to hearing the women’s accounts. Trevor mentored three women in succession, developing a much greater understanding of the situation for women in the organisation. He observed consistent patterns and commonalities, particularly in the way that women were denied access to and overlooked for opportunities that were important to their development and career success. He challenged this gendering of opportunity wherever possible, seeking out opportunities for his mentees and women in his team, and challenging the allocation of opportunities by the management team of which he was a part. Trevor’s mentoring approach could therefore be described as bifocal – bringing both the women’s development and the institutional gender change process sharply in focus. Already a ‘tempered radical’ (Meyerson and Scully 1995), an insider working for organisational change, Trevor was able to translate his developing gender insight into action.

The leadership development work with women participants remains at the heart of the LDW program mandate. True to its bifocal intent the program aimed to develop leaders who were capable of not only

critically 'seeing' the gendered culture of their organisation but were also equipped as leaders and change agents. The curriculum incorporated gender and organisation scholarship and an emphasis on leadership as a gendered construct and practice. Much of the work of the program revolved around re-visioning and reclaiming leadership, through explorations of identity, power and culture.

Interviews with the women, in their peer learning groups provided strong affirmation of the effectiveness of the program in supporting participants' leadership development. They embraced change agency as part of their leadership development, and had enthusiastically adopted (and adapted) the idea of 'small wins' (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000) as an empowering concept. Their enactment of leadership challenged the gendered status quo, yet the women did not appear to be guided by an overt or articulated gender insight. Their development as leaders was an ongoing and robust change, still evident between one and three years post program completion.

## A realistic strategy for organisational change?

Developing 'constituencies for change' (Kolb 2003), those who could see 'gender', who could hold onto a gender narrative, proved elusive although not impossible. This difficulty is not surprising; indeed it is to be expected. Rendering gender relevant and visible is an enduring difficulty within transformative gender interventions. Recent scholarship exploring organisational gender change interventions has increasingly focused on the ways in which gender becomes lost or is rendered irrelevant (Benschop and Verloo 2006; Charlesworth and Baird 2007; Eveline and Bacchi 2009; Rao, Stuart and Kelleher 1999). As Eveline and Bacchi (2009: 566) observe, obeying the organisational 'rules of relevance' serves to disappear gender, situating it 'below the horizon' of what matters. This lack of gender relevance is normalised, and is symptomatic of the gendered organisation (Benschop and Verloo 2006). Organisational gender change projects encounter this lack of gender relevance and the incapacity to 'see' gender as the first hurdle.

As expected, this re-fashioning of a WO program into a transformative intervention, met with only partial success, often falling short of the transformative ideal. A focus on gender and the gendered organisation was often lost, with the spotlight frequently returning to the 'short' agenda of a focus on the women. Despite this there were those who moved towards the 'long' transformative agenda, with Trevor an exemplar of this possibility.

I concluded that despite this slippage between theory and practice, WO programs can provide the vehicle for transformative interventions.

As a strategy currently employed by organisations they can be built on in both modest and far-reaching ways to further the transformative agenda.

## Recommendations and links

This detailed study of the effectiveness of the bifocal approach has resulted in recommendations for practice. These cluster around the development of gender insight and how this can be further facilitated with mentors and participants, an increasing focus on developmental mentoring where two-way learning can occur, strengthening possibilities for collective action, and connecting and supporting those who are working for gender change. These areas for further inquiry and development dovetail nicely with a number of Swedish scholarship strengths, as I currently perceive them to be:

The innovative design of interventions linked with the use of action research approaches (Amundsdotter 2009; Eriksson 2009). This facilitates engagement with multiple players within organisations, including men, and focuses on organisational change.

Innovative approaches to, and an emphasis on, building the gender competence of organisational members (Amundsdotter 2010; Höök, Wahl and Holgersson 2009; Lövkrona and Widén 2009).

The contribution of these strengths to the sustainability of gender interventions (Gunnarsson, 2009).

## Conclusion

My hope is that by ‘taking coals to Newcastle’, paradoxically possible only because of our shared theoretical understanding, rich possibilities for cross-pollination, future collaboration and future publishing will emerge. Ultimately this can enrich the theory and practice of gender change interventions for all involved.

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