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Constructing Gendered NGO Selves: Utilizing Identity Work to Assess NGO Gender Advocacy and Politics

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Abstract
This paper seeks to address a need in development and international literature regarding assessments of nongovernmental organizations (NGO). While NGO scholars have provided a great deal of information regarding NGO service evaluation, there are relatively few detailed studies that look at what is happening within these organizations as solutions to problems related to development and democratization. This paper uses both a developed sociological lens and empirical case study from Latin America to illustrate the internal gender dynamics of NGOs and the value of a narrative approach for making evaluations of NGO efficacy. It is shown that NGO members’ experiences as social change agents are locally constituted, as well as the challenges and opportunities for gender equality.

Keywords
NGOs, Gender Mainstreaming, Identity Work, Agency

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) represent an important set of organizations considered the vehicle of choice to administer social programs. Since the 1990s Latin America has experienced a “veritable ‘boom’ in NGOs specializing in gender policy assessment, project execution, and social service delivery” (Álvarez 1999:182). Popularized during The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in 1995 in Beijing, the idea of gender mainstreaming has now been adopted nearly universally by many development organizations to address the critical area of the advancement of women in the realm of development policy and social planning (Baden and Goetz 1997:5; True 2003). Questions persist, however, regarding to the type of gender politics associated with professional gender mainstreaming in NGOs.
Literature on NGO gender mainstreaming has been largely interested in and bound to the question of whether NGOs are “doing good” (Murdock 2003). NGO literature is filled with evaluations about the potential of NGOs to mainstream gender into its organizational structure, delivery of social services, and capacity building projects both within and outside the organization (Fisher 1997; Markowitz and Tice 2002; Tiessen 2004). Movements to professionalize and institutionalize a gender perspective in NGOs have been given attention for not only expanding opportunities for feminist politics and but also challenging social change (Álvarez 1999; Ewig 1999; Hankivsky 2005; Karlsson 2010; Unterhalter and North 2010). Sassen (1998) notes that globalization, privatization, and the growth of nonstate actors has altered and, in particular, opened the political arena beyond the state itself. Yet pressures behind NGO gender mainstreaming include the potential for a transformative feminist agenda to be co-opted by organizational structures, divisions, and power imbalances (Gideon 1998; Moser and Moser 2005). Moser (2005), therefore, asks whether gender mainstreaming had failed as a feminist strategy.

This paper answers a call to develop theoretically guided projects that generate insights into how NGO members actually think about, embrace, and negotiate gender mainstreaming within their organizations (Murdock 2003:511). Scholarship is extensive and filled with a wide array of statements about the character and impact of NGO gender mainstreaming for its impact on NGO welfare service delivery, development project implementation, capacity building and democratization (Fisher 1997). Research has examined the historical trajectory of gender mainstreaming in NGOs (Álvarez 1999; Moser and Moser 2005), comparative analyses of NGO gender mainstreaming in the North and South (Markowitz and Tice 2004), local regional and national differences in mainstreaming implementation (Wendoh and Wallace 2005), and the effect of state politics/law and neoliberalism on gender mainstreaming (Arellano-López and Petras 1994; Clisby 2005).

More recently scholars have attended to the “local” character of gender mainstreaming within organizations. Markowitz (2001:42) defines the local as “close observation of the small interaction that constitutes the lived experience of promoting, accepting, and
contesting modes of social change.” Scholars have detailed the way mainstreaming is translated into internal organizational attitudes and practices (Karlsson 2010; Tiessen 2004; Unterhalter and North 2010). Although more attention is being given to the “local” realities of NGO gender mainstreaming, there is an absence of a theoretical framework to specify the symbolic interactional process that constitutes NGO members’ attitudes and practices on gender mainstreaming. The aim of this article is to show how a close examination of NGO gender members’ identity work impacts the possibilities and limitations present within professionalized NGO gender mainstreaming.

To this end, I examine NGO members’ identity work in order to shed light on three key issues that the literature suggests shape the politics of NGO gender mainstreaming: NGO context, accountability pressures, and internal hierarchies (Tiessen 2004). Using a Colombian NGO (which I refer to as COL) as a case study, this article investigates how gender mainstreaming language and policy has been converted to changes within the organization. The dynamics of NGO workplaces, particularly internal gender inequalities, are explored as a symbolic process of self-construction and interpretation of discourses pertaining to professional gender mainstreaming. Conceptualizing gender mainstreaming as identity work helps answer in new ways the NGO “doing good” question. First, NGO identity work fits the current direction of the literature which points to ethnographic approaches that view NGOs as situated phenomena produced from daily symbolic interaction, rather than static good and bad types (Murdock 2003). Second, an interpretive approach offers a novel way to assess NGOs’s ability to constitute a platform for generating transformative gender politics by revealing the active strategies members use to construct their relationship to gender mainstreaming (Hankivsky 2005; Murdock 2003).

THE NGO GENDER MAINSTREAMING FIELD

True and Mintrom (2001:28) describe gender mainstreaming as “efforts to scrutinize and reinvent processes of policy formulation and implementation across all issue areas to address and rectify persistent and emerging disparities between men and women.” At heart, mainstreaming a gender perspective centers gender power
relations within organizational policy and service delivery (Kabeer 1994:xii). Gender mainstreaming represents a dominant discursive platform used by a range of NGOs to conduct gender advocacy (Tiessen 2004). Markowitz and Tice (2002) note that the character of NGO gender mainstreaming is shaped by several factors—namely, the organizational context and culture, the pressures of accountability associated with professionalization, and internal hierarchies associated with formalized workplaces.

Gender mainstreaming is situated within a regional and historical context that frames the goals, practices and programs of NGOs. In Latin America, political changes regionwide have been tied to the rise of NGOs as mediators of activism around gender issues. In the 1980s the Colombian government created the National Council for the Integration of Women into Development and later in the 1990s Colombia officially adopted “high-level” institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming. This provided for stand-alone government ministries, offices within the head of state’s department, or quasi-autonomous state agencies, such as national commissions (True and Mintrom 2001:31-32). These government efforts lead to a “perceived permeability” of the state to civil society interventions and the growth of NGO gender advocacy. Álvarez (1999) describes the rise of NGOs’ relevance, particularly large and well-funded organizations, as the “NGOization” of Latin American feminisms.

During the early- to mid-1990s, scholars documented an increased cooperation between NGOs and the state (Carroll 1992; Fisher 1992), focusing on the state-NGO linkage and NGO policy advocacy as a key dimension in the promotion of democracy and in the promotion of a gender perspective. COL serves as a good case study of NGO gender mainstreaming field, since Colombian NGOs are part of the so-called “second wave” of institutionalizing a gender perspective in policy and planning (Beall 1998). COL has been active in Colombia for several decades as a Christian organization focused on projects of poverty alleviation and community development with a focus on youth. COL represents an intermediary social service delivery organization, or “mainstream” NGO.² It was during the late 1990s that COL integrated a gender perspective into its strategic mission. This is reflected in one of COL’s organizational document discussing the origin of a gender perspective in its vision.
For more than one decade, the personnel of [COL] have been accumulating knowledge and experience on capacity building in gender and development. In 1992, the Board of directors of [COL] adopted a policy of "the integration of woman in development" for the entire fraternity. In 1997, a leadership position was created oriented toward gender to implement and support this perspective, which was later revised to reflect approach GAD in 1999.

As an intermediary NGO that has adopted a gender mainstreaming perspective, COL offers a chance to examine the politics of professional NGO gender mainstreaming. As will be discussed, COL’s adoption of gender mainstreaming can be understood as not only a vital part of its overall strategic plan but also to the identity work of COL members.

Statements on the “NGOization” of gender advocacy are mixed and often tied to demands placed on organizations from donor accountability. For those who accept the basic assumptions of Western (capitalist) development, but seek alternative strategies to the state, NGOs are labeled “good” (Bebbington and Farrington 1993; Frantz 1987). Others see NGOs as “bad”, acting as an “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1994) that deepens capitalism by facilitating state privatization, obscuring class politics, and disrupting grassroots mobilization through an overemphasis on professionalism. In Latin American, accountability became a central concern of NGOs in the 1990s as funds were tied to recipients’ ability to exhibit concrete program outcomes (Markowitz and Tice 2002). From the mid-to late-1990s, scholarly attention moved to understanding the organizational changes of NGOs towards professionalization brought on by neoliberalism. Within a neoliberal climate of structural adjustments focused on state-cutbacks, NGOs were encouraged to streamline services.

In order to cope with these financial demands, NGOs formalized development proposals, brought in policy and research experts, and linked program goals to evaluations measures. Money flows increasingly required more complex project plans and donors
demanded regular evaluation reports, which added staff time. NGOs responded by formalizing the organizational structure and staffing more professionals to administer the new complexities of paperwork and community projects. Therefore, many NGOs began to focus on practical ways to measure women’s empowerment, such as capacity building around occupational skills and integration into the market that match the self-help agenda of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Craske 1999). This is as opposed to the promotion of contestatory activities, such as mobilization and consciousness-raising, which escape simple quantification (Álvarez 1999). By the late 1990s, the legitimacy of NGOs as progressive social change agents was put into doubt as questions were raised about how the professionalization of organizational practices moderates NGO discourses so as to interact with state agencies and international bodies and obtain large project grants (Craske 1999).

Financial pressures to formalize organizational structures also lead to specialization and internal hierarchies built around pay, status, and authority linked to credentials. Riger (1994) notes that with larger grant funds conflict and competition increase along educational and class differences. Dealing with donor institutions creates staff and volunteer divisions as the NGO seeks personnel with specific capacities. As Tarrés (1998) points out, it is typically individuals with privileged class backgrounds and formal education that carry credentials that move into higher-level positions. While professional hierarchies in large, well-funded NGOs may be efficient, professionalization also neutralizes social distances by marginalizing working-class individuals from participation in the process of decision-making and agenda-setting (Karlsson 2010).

Scholarship on gender mainstreaming seeks to identify not only how gender policy is being locally implemented within NGOs but also the degree of flexibility available within the gender politics of a neoliberal climate (Álvarez 1999; Carroll 1992; Karlsson 2010; Murdock 2003). Murdock (2003) argues that characterizing NGO gender advocacy as either essentially “good” or “bad” occludes the wider range of gender politics actually happening within these organizations. Observing the identity work of COL members sheds light on the active constraints on NGO gender mainstreaming and the alternative gender politics made possible through the process of self-
construction. In what follows, I explore the theoretical facets of identity work, present my research on the identity work behind gender mainstreaming, and offer a discussion on how examining the construction of self-identity advances more general assessments on the professionalization of NGOs today.

THEORETICAL SENSITIVITY: IDENTITY WORK AS LENS TO STUDY NGO GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Identity work represents “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:15). The theoretical work of Holstein and Gubrium (2000) and Broad (2002) offers a means for understanding the formative process of NGO identity work. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2000:102), the collective (e.g., social organization) represents a set of “going concerns” of temporarily habitualized behavior and interaction. Selves, on the other hand, are the individual constructions that emerge amidst these “going concerns” or relatively stable patterns of interaction. This suggests that the social construction of selves emerges out of situational circumstances and resources, as well as individuals’ active negotiation with these conditions (Gubrium and Holstein 2000:9). The construction of subjectivities implies the dual workings of social context and personal agency.

Subjectivities draw from a context of going concerns in the construction of self-identities, particularly dominant discourses. The production of selves happens in the context of local cultures (e.g., NGO) that provide cultural and material resources for individuals’ identity work. Selves are made “in accordance with local relevancies” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:104). Local culture refers to the relatively stable ways of making meaning that are sanctioned by the collective and accessible to persons to use in their immediate setting (Gubrium and Holstein1997:172). In this paper, NGOs are appreciated as an important site for self-production, serving to provide discursive resources for individual NGO members’ identity work. Holstein and Gubrium (2000:12) clarify that the self is not a passive object simply absorbing or consuming their context for the purposes of constructing an identity. Agency involves the
interpretation, negotiation, or contestation of the boarder discourses in place.

A dialectical approach to the study of identity work sees the production of selves as a noun/verb interaction (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004:511). Identity work, therefore, includes the construction of selves from *discourses-in-practice* and *discursive practice*. Discourses-in-practice are those cultural discourses in use and which constrain meaning making, in that they are already in place and functioning locally. It thus relates to the constitutive dimension of discourse (the nouns). Discursive practice stands as the agenic process in which individuals make meaning out of narratives already in play to construct a sense of self-identity (the verb). Highlighting the interpretive practice of individuals in collective action shows how NGO members “talk themselves into existence” (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004). Thinking in terms of this study, COL members’ identities are the product of their reliance on the dominant discourses of the organization (e.g., gender mainstreaming), as well as their active negotiation with these narratives. This self-constituting process is the site where identities are produced and how COL members generate gender politics through “conscious dialogue and debate” (Murdock 2003:511-12).

Identity work theoretically moves us beyond essentialist characterizations of NGO politics. As Broad (2002:32) notes, it is central to avoid an over-determined view of NGO actors and retain a constructivist viewpoint of the “conditions of self-production as resources (not directives) for self-production.” NGOs are considered an important site of self-production, in that they serve as the conditional, discursive resources for individuals’ identity work. These contextual conditions, however, are “not directives” that speak to selves’ mere “embeddedness” or integration into the functioning of a larger collective organizational identity (Broad 2002). Identity work does not imply that the self is subsumed into the collective, since what is embedded is the “production” of selves (Broad 2002:321). In this way, NGO gender advocacy can be appreciated as non-static efforts that continually recreate gender politics.

**METHODLOGY**

In order to illustrate how identity work shapes NGO gender politics, I will draw on my research on COL. I conducted and...
audiotaped, in-depth, private interviews face-to-face and over telephone with 30 individuals employed and/or volunteering for COL. Of these, 22 face-to-face interviews were collected at the organization’s headquarters and downtown office branch, as well as eight telephone interviews with individuals working and/or volunteering in three other cities. Participants were recruited through a listserv and e-mail announcement directed at a large number of COL members. I also personally spoke to each department in COL’s central headquarters’ building allowing COL staff and volunteers to be introduced to the study. Women represent a larger proportion of the organization. This is particularly the case at “project sites” located outside of the headquarters offices, where the majority of workers and volunteers are women. While women represent a larger proportion of employees and volunteers, the voices of COL men were also gathered to compare the process of identity work. A total of 20 women and 10 men were interviewed. The larger proportion of women to men in the sample reflects the general gender distribution within the NGO.

Semi-structured interviews focused on capturing narrative instances that signal the social construction of COL members’ self-identity. Guiding questions included items on how COL members talk about themselves, their concerns, and their interactions with others in the NGO. COL members’ views of the organization’s gender mainstreaming policy, experience as professional gender advocates, and management of social relationships (e.g., co-workers) were collected. Organizational materials (pamphlets, reports, and other organizational documents) were also gathered to reflect the organizational discourses of the NGO. As Broad (2002:321) suggests, organizational texts are “sites” where “identity work is in process.” COL texts are not only a set of discursive resources COL individuals use for self-production, but also these texts are re-inscribed with meaning through NGO members’ identity work.

The results below describe how identity work clarifies the role that NGO context, professional accountability, and internal hierarchies play in NGO gender mainstreaming. First I discuss the substantive features of COL identity work as based on the dominant culture of the NGO. Second, COL members’ discursive practice is explored. Here, the politics of gender mainstreaming is tied to the way
NGO members interpret professional accountability and their organization’s divisions of labor.

NGO CONTEXT: COL GENDER MAINSTREAMING AS NARRATIVE RESOURCE FOR IDENTITY WORK

Development agencies use a common language to discuss their commitment to making gender “a major issue of policy and practice for donors and for … NGOs, at least in rhetoric” (Wallace 1998:159; Álvarez 1999; Karlsson 2010). The idea of mainstreaming a gender perspective emerged in the 1990s as part of the Gender and Development (GAD) approach. A conceptual shift from integrating women in development (known as Women in Development approach), GAD addresses how gender inequality is reproduced through the gender relations enacted as part of social structures, institutions, and culture. Gender advocates have sought to mainstream this viewpoint in international development organizations (Baden and Goetz 1997:5). What follows is a demonstration of how NGO gender mainstreaming is reliant on identity work. COL members define themselves, frame interests, and elaborate concerns in reference to the dominant gender advocacy terms of the NGO.

COL understands gender to be a central aspect to the mission of the organization:

[COL], an international Christian NGO, committed to transformative development, recognizes gender and development (GAD) as an essential and critical component of its ministry. (COL organizational document)

The way COL members described gender in their everyday life was through the NGO’s idea of “transversality”. COL sets “transversal” themes as central to all aspects to the organization’s mission and practice. The examples below show how gender mainstreaming is linked to self-construction. COL women and men reference the official gender discourse of the NGO as they build themselves as gender advocates.3
Well, I know that one of the transversal themes for the design, the implementation for the projects and the programs, and the mission of my work, is precisely a focus on gender. I consider that the institution has been incorporating in our work. I am preoccupied in technical processes, in preparation for ... working the focus of gender in the different projects. (Interview 2)

It is very important to talk about gender relations. Well, we are in a place [COL] where gender is always talked about, and so I also talk about gender. (Interview 8)

COL members identify who they are—“the mission of my work”—through a correspondence with the NGO’s gender narrative of transversality. Who they are as COL members is defined by how they regularly talk about and integrate gender into their daily organizational activities.

The rationale given by COL for making gender a transversal theme has to do with the significance a gender perspective has for the social change mission of the organization.

... it is the systematic integration of a sensibility, conscience, and analysis of gender within the ministry of [COL] in each one of the work areas. The equality of genders not only affects the result and effectiveness of the projects of [COL], but also contributes to transformative social relations and dynamics within the personnel of [COL]. (COL organizational document)

COL makes a connection between mainstreaming a gender perspective and effecting change in social projects and in the lives of its personnel. COL members similarly highlight the transformative capacitates gained from adopting a gender perspective. The examples below demonstrate how COL women discuss their own personal development in light of the NGO’s goals of social/personal change.
That transversal theme [gender] takes me to a sense of social sensitivity; it takes me to find my own proper interests. To recognize persons as having value. (Interview 23)

A gender analysis is very important. I believe that it is more; it is positive because it is to improve quality of life and self-perception. It is recognition at the personal level. Obviously, it influences me directly as a person, to believe and to get to know one’s own capacities, possibilities. (Interview 25)

COL men also talk about their self-development with the aid of the NGO’s gender narrative.

I’ve learned that to think about gender in my own personal life. We now need to see how gender works and affects us all. This helps us in our work and purpose as an organization. (Interview 29)

Gender comprises a dominant discourse COL members used to identify their sense of purpose in the organization and to develop a sense of self-worth by exploring one’s own “interests”, “capacities”, “possibilities” and “personal life”. As Gubrium and Holstein (2000) suggest, COL members’ style of identity construction is congruent with the NGO’s overall goal to establish an “integration of a sensibility, conscience, and analysis of gender within the ministry of [COL]”

One way COL positions a gender perspective in its mission is through the self-telling of the history of how the larger COL community transitioned to a GAD approach. The GAD perspective reflects the local efforts of academics, policy-makers and social movement activists to reconceptualize development models. More specifically, utilizing a gender perspective means a deeper focus on gender relations as a point of analysis:
Gender and development do not focus on the needs of women and girls in isolation, but rather on gender relations in context. (COL organizational document)

As this organizational text explains, a GAD approach is meant to explore how gender is a sociocultural phenomenon wherein “everything is relational and transformation depends on these relations” (Organizational Pamphlet). Interestingly, COL members bring in this local gender perspective by narrating their life stories. Below are two examples of COL women utilizing a gender perspective discourse to recount and reinterpret their childhood experiences:

Working in [COL] has led me to think of many memories. I think a lot about my childhood and how I was viewed and treated differently from my brothers. I always had to do more housework than my brothers. I cleaned the floors and had to cook. Now I know that it was because of cultural beliefs. (Interview 6)

It sounds ridiculous but I was never given a key to my house when I was young, even when I was 16 years old. My father did not think that young women should have keys to the house. It was not appropriate. But that is a political project, right? For him the key meant power and control. So (pause) you just accept it. It hurts me a little. Here in [COL] that is talked about, and I have learned how important it is to empower women to make decisions for themselves. (Interview 12)

Consistent with the dominant discourse of COL, these two women relied on a socio-cultural view of gender to give meaning to past experiences. As they point out, the new awareness and meaning to their memories is a recent event, triggered in large part by a context of learning and talking about gender in the NGO. In both cases, they “now know” and “have learned” a new way of understanding specific
memories by recognizing the “hurt” caused from the unequal distribution of “power and control” among men and women.

COL women also employed a gender perspective to critically redefine the current domestic work structure in their family. One COL woman, for example, chose to discuss how her childhood experiences are repeated today through her own daughter.

I grew up with three brothers and they never did any of the housework. My father and mother prohibited them for doing it. I was expected to do most of it with my mother. Taking care of the home was the woman’s job. My husband does not like to see his son clean. But I know from what I have learned working here that those roles are cultural and not based on something natural. My husband wants my son to get a job, but what about his daughter? She needs to be economically independent, right (pause) or else she will never be able to stand up for herself.

(Interview 20)

Consistent with the NGO’s focus on a relational view of gender, this COL woman identifies the uneven distribution of domestic work as a result of cultural roles and the ability of men to collectively exclude women from economic power. In this case, her husband supports the son but not the daughter in obtaining “economic independence.” This re-interpretation of family structure is based on what was “learned working here” (the discursive context of COL) and demonstrates how the construction of a new gender politics is forthcoming in NGO members own lives.

For COL, the promotion of a gender perspective in the organization is a direct response to theoretical changes in the study of gender. Specifically, gender inequality is now considered relationally and based on institutional arrangements structured in ways that create uneven development among men and women. COL describes this understanding of the origin of gender inequality in the following way:
The investigations at the base and academic level began to demonstrate in what way the interactions between genders impact the development process. The "Gender and Development" concept became the term recognized for a progressive focus to development that emphasized the perspective and experience of woman. It centered on the way unequal relations averted an equitable and sustainable development. (COL organizational document).

This conceptual apparatus not only serves as COL’s view on development, but also as central to the identity of the organization:

Gender and Development ... reflects the spirit, the central values and the politics of [COL]. (COL organizational document)

COL members on a personal level applied this strategy of identification with GAD in order to describe their own perceptions and experiences with regards to equality within the organization.

For example, both COL men and women noted that practicing gender equality requires that necessary conditions be met that allows all genders to participate fully in social life. This most often meant having equal opportunities and being able to be part of the decision-making process at work. This is how two COL women described the idea of gender equality in the organization:

For me equality is having the same opportunities. I am talking about having the same opportunities in salary, opportunities to participate, opportunities in decisions, cultural opportunities. In [COL], you participate and in participating you feel like a person. Here I make decisions as a person, with my opinions. Participation is not simply raising one’s hand and saying something, it is to share. (Interview 28)
Gender equality is important to all human beings, because it is a political commitment and practice. I feel like I can speak and participate in organizational processes. I believe that it is in this way that gender is being worked. Basically, that makes me feel good as a person. (Interview 2)

Most evident in these quotes is that gender equality requires a practical component that assures persons “opportunities to participate”, such as in decision-making at work. COL women not only viewed the practice of gender equality as central, but also expressed how the very reality of this practice in their NGO affects their personal sense of worth and set of interests. In other words, the discourse of gender equality in practice is used here to highlight the reality of their own “opinions” and sense of “feeling good” as a person.

Not everyone, however, expressed having the same experience within the NGO.

Well, I have had difficulties. In my personal case, I was in the process of entering a [professional position] and well I was here with a group while my boss was away. My preparation is in [a professional position], nevertheless my boss was changed and in came another person to occupy that position and this person selected only men for the group. And this new boss chose who was going to be my boss. Put it this way, I felt like my work was not acknowledged. It seemed like there was not the type of equality that is talked about here. It seems like men are favored first. (Interview 4)

For this COL woman, her efforts to acquire a higher occupational position “were not acknowledged” because “men are favored first.” In this way, identity construction is also a way to reveal how individuals talk about and assess the state of gender politics within their NGO.

Indeed, while COL men closely mirror this strategy of linking their personal identity to their experience as an organizational
member, they often did so in more general terms that did not speak to the everyday opportunities and constraints within their own organization. As can be seen, COL men narrate a form an identity that links a GAD perspective of development to the workings of the organization at large.

People used to think of development as a general idea. This is, of course, not true anymore, especially here [in COL]. Development has a gender dimension. Not everyone has the same opportunities to grow because of how women and many others are treated in society. (Interview 8)

While COL men and women’s construction both rely on a GAD discourse, this narrative seems to play on a more general and externalized role for COL men than women. As one COL man noted, the NGO’s GAD approach defines him (and all others) in his thoughts and actions: “We know this and apply this to our projects in communities.” COL men preferred to talk about how GAD has been important to communities as opposed to within the organization. This differed from COL women who mentioned the significance GAD has for improving personal and organizational relations.

**DOING PROFESSIONAL GENDER MAINSTREAMING**

In this section, illustrations are offered of how COL members use their personal stories to actively construct professional gender mainstreaming and consciousness-raising. This identity work also helps to define the opportunities and limitations of COL gender mainstreaming politics. According to Holstein and Gubrium (2000:12), the self is agenic because individuals accomplish selves by using “biographical particulars” to reinterpret dominant cultural narratives. Holstein and Gubrium (2000:90) refer to this process as “discursive practice”, or how COL members do self. An intersectional framework is instructive here because it alerts us to the biographical particulars through which COL members construct their identities. An intersectional lens reveals how arrangements among social actors are impacted by the biographical location of individuals along axes of gender, race, class, and age, to name a few (Acker 2006; Baca-Zinn
and Thorton-Dill 1996; Collins 2000). Exploring the intersectional identity work of COL members reveals the relations of power built along gender, race, class and age within NGOs.

**The Gendered Politics of Professional Accountability**

In the decade of the 1990s, civil organizations adopted a professional orientation to gender advocacy by developing their applied research and lobbying skills in order to convince states and the private sector that transformative gender advocacy could be translated to gender policy projects (Álvarez 1999:182). NGOs sought to establish themselves as “qualified” professional gender advocates that employ accountability measure to implement service projects. COL follows the general outlook of the larger NGO field, emphasizing how professional accountability grounds gender advocacy in measurable performance outcomes. Specifically, development professionals not only rely on the conceptual ideas of GAD, but also employ practical tools to implement gender into service programs. COL describes this orientation in the following way:

> Now, this cultural change in the organization and in the practice of the ministry needs to go beyond a mere better understanding and change of values. It is not sufficient to teach of the importance of gender in development. Our professionals around the world already know this now. What they need are tools that allow them to apply what they know. (COL organizational document)

Doing gender mainstreaming, therefore, is in large measure a professional undertaking, requiring “tools” that allow for the application of the GAD value system.

COL members constructed professional selves by defining the skills and tools necessary to act as gender advocates. Some COL members noted that successfully performing one’s professional duties requires specific behavior—namely, spending long hours working, being organized, and paying attention to project details. As one COL
woman explained, these elements are the hallmark characteristics of high-quality, professional work.

I consider myself to an organized and detail-oriented person. But that is needed in our job, right. It is our responsibility to be organized for the projects that we do. If I see an incorrect word, I fix it. Not everyone is this way. I am. It is my role as a professional. (Interview 10)

COL individuals explain being professional means acting like one; it includes taking on a certain “responsibility” for how one’s work should be done within a professional setting.

COL members not only reproduced the going narrative of professionalism but also interpreted this approach toward gender advocacy with new meaning. Drawing from their biographical experience as professional women and professional mothers, COL women described gender advocacy as unequal work between women and men. The following accounts show how COL women reinterpret “professionalism” by emphasizing how gender and class create hierarchal divisions of labor.

Well, basically it is different because women are more sensitive toward others. It is to say, men are a little stern (pause) I do not know the word. He [a male supervisor] is a little uncoordinated. The relationship between son and mother creates this a lot. They [men] are dependent on breakfast. Men are not detail-oriented, to use a word. (Interview 11)

It is interesting that women are more detail-oriented than men. I think that it is because of the way persons are raised. In Colombia, from very little, men are raised to be dependent on women. Women are who maintain order. For that reason you see women in [COL] as more organized. I, for
example, had a boss who was a man who was completely dependent on me. In one sense women reproduce that…. (Interview 10)

The men here [in COL] always are walking at a slower pace, but not me. I run. (Interview 21)

Family gender roles are described as inducing a style of childhood socialization wherein women are expected to “keep order” in the home while men learn the benefits of being “dependent,” “uncoordinated,” “slower paced.” COL women explained how the domestication of women’s labor is transferred to the workplace where women become caretakers of the organization. Women are to manage “completely dependent” bosses, or to “run” to get things done in the organization. Importantly, women’s personal family experiences were not only used to identify the gender division of labor at COL but also to form the basis of women’s critique. As one COL woman put it, since the family “raises” women and men a certain way “people reproduce that” gender inequality at work.

Interviews showed that social class also structured the organization’s hierarchal division of labor. Here again, COL women used their biographical stories as mothers to intersect gender with class and to reveals gendered relations at work. Of primary importance according to COL women was the ability of mothers to have financial resources to hire domestic assistance. Affording domestic assistance was viewed as distinctly impacting some COL women:

We know that women have two jobs, one at work and the other at home. There are many women here in COL with children, but they cannot all afford to pay for help. Those women that do not have the resources come to work more tired. (Interview 13).

It is very difficult to have a career and be a mother. Many times I cannot attend meetings
held during the weekend, because I need to be with my children. What can I do? COL understands this and for that reason those meetings are not obligatory. But I still want to participate. Men always go because their wife takes care of the children, but I cannot go. It hurts us as professionals. (Interview 24)

These COL women explained that their responsibilities as mothers can place them at a professional disadvantage vis-à-vis COL men if financial resources are unavailable to free them from domestic caretaking. As one COL women noted, COL men’s gender frees them from obstacles to attending professional meetings since “[m]en always go because their wife takes care of the children.” COL women’s personal narratives became a way to tell the story of unequal opportunity constructed on gender and class relations.

Unlike the narratives above, COL men described the pressures of professional gender advocacy in more general terms. The following account is illustrative of how COL men talked about professional gender advocacy:

Today community work must be done professionally because this is how we [COL] obtain donors and funds to implement projects. We all must act as professionals and be professional in everything we do. We all grew up in a time when you could just begin working with communities because you wanted to help. But today it is more complicated because of the role of money. (Interview 8)

This COL man relies on the personal experience of being a “professional” to explore challenges and stress at work. In contrast to COL women’s narratives that spoke about their motherhood, COL men draw from biographical particulars shared by everyone (“We”) to characterize work experiences. In this way, COL men’s identity work did not parallel that of women and tended to emphasize how COL professionals equally share the pressures of obtaining and raising
donor funds. As these examples show, a focus on the “micro-practice” of identity work reveals the construction of professionalism within COL and exposes the multifaceted nature of gender politics within the organization. Identity work generates different perceptions and understandings of what is professional gender advocacy and who does this labor.

Internal Hierarchies: Intersecting Gender, Race, and Class

Along with professionalism, a stated goal of COL is to use a gender perspective to raise consciousness among personnel about their experiences with gender inequality. According to COL literature, a gender perspective is meant to raise the consciousness of personnel regarding issues of gender and development in a participatory and educational context, wherein personnel can discuss the obstacles that they have confronted and the successes they have been witness to when working with gender issues.

As with the production of professional selves, COL members construct themselves in line with COL’s larger discourse of consciousness-raising. COL members accomplish an identity by sharing biographically inscribed testimonials about their ever-growing awareness of gender inequality, both within and outside the organization. Centrally important though is how COL women rely on intersectional accounts to constitute their new awareness of “gender issues”. As the following examples illustrate, COL members simultaneously draw on theirs and others’ biographical specifics to explain how gender and race interact to create differential experiences at work.

The examples below show awareness being built around the intersection of race and gender. Consciousness about gender inequality centered on the idea that inequality has multiple intersectional dimensions since women do not make up a homogenous group:

Although everyone here knows about injustice, it is not always simple to see. I have a black friend and her experiences at work were very different than mine. After talking with her, I saw
that she had lost confidence in speaking during meetings and respect from people. I will never forget her, because talking with her opened my eyes that there are differences between women and it is important to reflect on here at work. (Interview 20)

A COL man offered a similar story:

Well, I’m a black man One can look at society and see how people relate and see that there are instances when white men speak less with black men. It seems to me that those instances are important because being black does not mean that that individual does not have the same capacities as a whites, the same capacities to speak, to think, and to participate. (Interview 8)

A sense of self-awareness that was achieved by making visible how the intersection between race and gender function in their own and friends’ lives. Testimonials draw attention to how confidence, respect and opportunity to participate are privileges that are distributed unevenly among white men and women.

COL women also built awareness stories by talking intersectionally about their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences about how professionalism generates social distances among women. Some COL women discussed the hierarchy between women and men located at the central offices and women in the campos (camps) who make up the majority of those who work directly in communities. In this case, several COL women drew from their racial and class biographies to describe a professional organizational hierarchy.

Yes there is a problem in how persons from the camps and the central offices communicate. Many of the women from the camps are Afro Colombian and do not have titles or the same level of education than persons from the center. We grew up poor and … did not have
the same access to education…. People in the center [central offices] don’t treat us as equal. (Interview 17)

There are more women in the camps than men. I do not know the numbers, but it is not equal. So when we talk about a hierarchy in terms of title, it is between women and men. And between Afro and metizo. It is a shame. (Interview 15)

To the extent that being a “professional” is defined as someone who is credentialed, Afro-Colombian women stand to be disenfranchised from the status accorded to professional COL workers. As one woman noted, the absence of a professional title or educational degree women of color in the camps leads them to not be treated equally. While Murdock (2003:516) notes that professionalization of NGO gender advocacy can exacerbate social distances between more economically privileged, university educated NGO workers and poorer target communities, COL women describe a similar dynamic within their organization. A narrow definition of professionalization threatens the important relationship between COL members working in the camps and those in the central offices. As one COL woman said, there is a “problem” in the way both sites “communicate” because of differences in professional prestige.

It was also through personal experiences that COL women challenged this inequality by narrating a broader definition of “professional” that elevated the position of COL women working in the camps.

I work in a camp and I know that persons with titles are treated better than persons without titles. During a meeting, women from the camps have to qualify what they say because they do not have the title that give you a legitimate voice. But I consider that persons in the camps have a lot of practical experience, empirical. I consider myself a professional with or without a title. (Interview 9)
There are different forms of dealing with situations. It needs to be recognized that experience is a way of knowing. In reality yes there is a hierarchy between persons with titles and those without. It should not be, because persons in the camps bring a lot, sometimes more that other persons because they are the ones that talk and work in the communities. I think that is sufficient to be a professional.... We should talk more about that here, simply because we are united in one job for justice. (Interview 10)

Being a professional includes more than earning a title or degree; it refers to a “way of knowing” built on everyday experience working with communities. A form of consciousness-raising is constructed around a new epistemological understanding of professional work that functions to balance the status of office and camp workers. As one COL woman put it, legitimacy to speak at meetings should not be tied to one’s credential, but to a person’s “practical experience.” In this way, COL women discursively inscribe value to women’s labor and recast the gender order.

Through the telling of awareness testimonials, COL members simultaneously constructed a sense of self and also demonstrate the development of a critical consciousness. COL members’ awareness stories were built on the interaction of their own (and others’) biographical experiences and the organizational narrative of consciousness-raising. COL women, for example, intersected gender, race, and class to elaborate the ways prestige is unevenly distributed within COL. The degree to which COL members both reproduce official gender mainstreaming narratives and create alternative political orientations suggests that NGO gender mainstreaming politics is multifaceted. The following section returns to the question of NGO gender politics and uses the case study of COL to assess whether professional NGO gender mainstreaming can offer transformative gender advocacy.
DOING GOOD?: GROUNDING NGO GENDER POLITICS IN IDENTITY WORK

Álvarez (1999:198) argues the efficacy of NGOs depends on whether NGOs can maintain a hybrid identity that allows for both a technical policy approach and more “transformative” activities in their gender advocacy. The political import of professionalized gender mainstreaming is dependent, at least in part, on the character of NGO members’ identity work. NGO’s do not represent static containers of political orientations and moves, but rather are fluid political discourses that organizational members construct. Specifically, the substantive discursive resources used by COL members and their interpretive practice outline the prospects for and constraints on NGOs to do transformative gender advocacy within and outside the organization (Álvarez 1999; Fisher 1997). Broad et al. (2004: 523) note, “the degree to which narratives can subvert hegemony depends on the social organization of their telling and how they reconstitute that social organization.”

Navigating the process of reporting on NGO gender mainstreaming practice is complicated given scholars’ multiple commitments. Murdock (2003) suggests as a researcher I need to be aware of my position as a Hispanic, middle-class North American man. My social position offers me safe distance to critically evaluate NGOs in ways that can impact the funding and status of these organizations. How then can COL members’ identity work assist researchers in compiling holistic yet also sensitive evaluations about the politics of NGO gender mainstreaming? Examining identity work moves us away from abstract good versus bad typologies as evaluation tools. Instead, detailing the construction of gender politics as a component of self-identity grounds us in the everyday “constraints and affordances under which [NGO members] attempt to ‘do good’ as they define it” (Murdock 2003:508).

Evaluating NGO Identity Work

Ewick and Silbey’s (1995) differentiation between “subversive” and “hegemonic” narrating is instructive when evaluating the transformative efficacy of NGO gender mainstreaming. Accordingly, subversive or transformative narratives “make visible and explicit the connection between particular lives and social organization” (Ewick
Hegemonic narratives, on the other hand, accomplish the opposite by overemphasizing the individual and obscuring the connections between individuals and the social organization of experience. This, in turn, renders invisible how behavior has a social, not natural, etiology. In this context, hegemonic narratives have “taken-for-granted assumptions” about social life that advertise certain behavioral norms as essentially natural, universal and thus dominant. Using COL as an illustrative case, this section considers the extent to which COL members’ identity work engages in “subversive narrating” to transform gender relations. As will be shown, COL members are observed discursively uniting the technical side of professionalism with the transformative enactment of a gender perspective.

Relations between women and men are shaped by their narrative context and the interpretive work they use to meet and interact. Through a professional identity COL members define and legitimize their gender advocacy work so as to put it into “practice”. COL members reveal through their storytelling the details of how to act as professional gender advocates. This is done through the labor of working long hours, being organized, and caring about the details important to the efficacy of social projects. COL women, however, reinterpreted the narrative of professional gender advocacy to critically explore unequal gender relations in their own and others’ lives.

Challenges and Opportunities for Transformative NGO Gender Advocacy

Using Ewick and Silbey’s conceptual scheme, it may also be argued that the way COL members interpretively engage their NGO’s gender discourse reproduces hegemony. COL members’ identity work also obscures the socially constructed character of their professional lives and, in this way, contributes to patriarchal gender relations. Thinking of themselves as women and mothers some COL members explained that essentialized gender roles are employed in the workplace. COL women noted that just as women and mothers are expected to assume a larger proportion of domestic labor, so too are professional women expected to do “housekeeping” at work.

COL members’ narratives obscured the uneven distribution of labor at the workplace. Some COL women, for example noted that
unless they perform the professional duties men fail to accomplish (e.g., work longer hours, keep an organized work setting, etc.), the NGO’s organizational structure would falter: “If I, and the women here, did not have everything in order, he [boss] would not know what to do” (Interview 10). As this COL woman goes on to admit, “[i]n one sense, women reproduce that, even though it should not be” (Interview 10). Depicting women as having to live by different standards than men for the sake of the organization may be a way in which unequal gender relations are naturalized and a dialogue about hegemonic practices silenced. COL women point out that “[b]eing detailed-oriented is necessary in our profession and women are left to do this type of work” (Interview 1). The gendering of occupational responsibilities through a naturalized narrative of “necessity” arguably frustrates transformative change in gender relations by disguising the social organization of a rigid gender division of labor.

What does this say about COL men’s commitment to gender mainstreaming? Do the accounts above suggest COL men do not see gender as important or when they speak of gender mainstreaming they do so because their organization expects them too? Dorothy Smith’s (1987) standpoint sociology is useful here for explaining differences between COL men and women’s identity construction. According to Smith, individuals’ ability to examine the full set of social relations (e.g., gender, race, class, etc.) is conditioned by their position in the structure of ruling relations. Smith contends that people in subordinate positions, by virtue of their experiences, have more concrete opportunities for seeing ruling relations. As Smith (1987:83-84) notes, “at almost every point women mediate for men the relation between the conceptual mode of action and the actual concrete forms on which it depends.” COL men, however, tended to narrate a more universal self related to their professional gender advocacy. COL men’s experience as professional was tied to issues pertaining to the organization as a whole—namely, donor development and fund raising. COL women’s everyday experience as “homemaker” within the organization revealed their subordinate location in the organization’s gender order and how women’s labor acts as scaffolding for men’s social position. Sociologically speaking, COL’s gender politics are contingent on members’ intersectional positioning.
within the gender order of the organization and how members discursively construct identities in light to those relations.

The professionalization of NGO gender mainstreaming has led to concerns that the “movement” side of NGO work is challenged by an emphasis on short-term, technical results in gender projects (e.g., poverty alleviation and women’s access to education). This may lead to NGOs’ inability to advance more “process oriented” forms of feminist interventions, such as consciousness raising that attempt to transform gender power relations and “defy gender-planning quick fixes” (Álvarez 1999). COL members participated in consciousness-raising activity by exposing the ways the lives of NGO workers are impacted by gender, race and class within the organization. COL women’s identity work, for example, discursively contended with how professionalization may inspire technical rather than critical debates concerning patriarchal structures within NGOs. Here COL women working in the camps broadened the definition of what is a professional gender advocate from the technical skills associated with a title/degree to the know-how developed from practical experience working with communities. In this way, COL women revitalize a transformative dimension to professional gender advocacy by identifying how social distances between women and men and among women are exacerbated within their organization. According to Ewick and Silbey, COL members’ identity can be seen as transformative since their personal narrating reveals how gender inequality is socially organized.

CONCLUSION

Studying identity work, on the one hand, allows researchers to witness how self-construction generates practical opportunities and limitations for unsettling hegemonic gender relations for development organizations. COL’s gender politics occurred through the “conscious dialogue and debate” of organizational members as they identify the dominant gender narratives of the NGO and actively interpret these discourse using personal life experiences (Murdock 2003:511-512). COL’s gender mainstreaming represented interpretive constructions that are simultaneously embedded in organizational narrative structures (e.g., the narrative resource of professionalism). This constructivist approach directly addresses the need in the NGO
literature to start “[u]npacking the micropolitics of NGOs” (Fisher 1997:450) by paying “particular attention to social actors’ ongoing negotiations of meaning and practice” (Murdock 2003:508). Identity work reveals the variations of professional gender mainstreaming and offers a way to avoid dualistic thinking regarding evaluations of NGOs. The transformative capacity of NGO gender advocacy hinges on these organizations’ ability to hold a dual-identity built on professional credibility within the development field and the promotion of more movement oriented action that extends beyond the visible and quantifiable rubric of neoliberal state policies.

Highlighting the everyday identity work done by NGO members allows us see the challenges and opportunities for transformative forms of gender advocacy. Universal criteria that assume clear-cut distinctions of what counts as “good” (e.g., resisting professionalization) or “bad” (e.g., adopting professionalization) may, therefore, have limited utility in the lived world of NGO members. COL members’ identity work includes not just the reproduction of professionalized gender mainstreaming, but also struggles to negotiate a gender politics from within the professional context of the NGO. COL members actively construct political spaces through their identity work as they weave dominant organizational discourses with personal intersectional characteristics. Identity work uncovers the operant language that “comprise[s] the field of the possible” within NGOs (Broad et al. 2004:515). The self-constituting work by COL members contains both the narratives that constrain and contest hegemonic interpretations of gender relations. The point is professional NGO gender advocates’ experiences as social change agents are locally produced, as are the gender politics of this landscape.

References


**Endnotes**

1. Identifying information about the NGOs actual name and that of interviewees has been disguised in order to maintain confidentiality. The fictitious name “COL” is used in place of the organization’s title.

2. Some typologize NGOs into the categories of “alternative” and “mainstream” (Fisher 1997). The “alternative” NGOs are often seen as similar to social movement organizations. Examples such as Left, feminist, human rights, and other similarly motivated NGOs may fit within the “alternative” category. Álvarez (1999) refers to feminist NGOs in Latin America as “hybrid,” because they are a mixture of gender policy advocacy and movement activities. “Mainstream”, or what some call “intermediary,” NGOs are more associated with traditional development discourse, and often the central focus of NGO literature (Carroll 1992). This second type is characterized as concerned with providing social services rather than critical consciousness-raising and grassroots mobilization (Álvarez 1999).

3. A limitation of this study is that perceptions and experiences are gathered from one NGO. However, to the extent that the NGO in this study is representative of the mainstream development field, as opposed to the grassroots feminist movement, this setting is useful for assessing the efficacy of professional gender mainstreaming and
the role identity production plays in shaping mainstream gender advocacy.

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