

## Virtual Dialogue: Resistances in Training for Gender Equality

### 6 - 13 May 2015

### Report

#### INTRODUCTION

Virtual Dialogues are online discussions geared towards promoting debate, dialogue, exchange of good practices, ideas, and information on topics related to Training for Gender Equality that respond to the interests, needs and motivations of [UN Women Community of Practice in Training for Gender Equality](#). The CoP, with over 1400 members at present, provides gender experts and practitioners with an open forum for articulation and debate, as well as a clearing house of materials and information on [Training for Gender Equality](#).

The overall aim of the Virtual Dialogues is to develop effective and inclusive processes of collective knowledge production with the end goal of improving the quality and impact of training for gender equality and highlighting its transformative potential. This was the **sixth Virtual Dialogue** run by the CoP, following past dialogues on [Online and Mobile Training for Gender Equality](#) in February 2015, [Training for Gender Equality and Beijing +20](#) in October 2014, [Transformation through Training for Gender Equality](#) in July 2014, [Knowledge on Training for Gender Equality](#) in February 2014, and [Evaluation of Training for Gender Equality](#) in July 2013.

#### What is Training for Gender Equality?

A transformative process that aims to provide knowledge, techniques and tools to develop skills and changes in attitudes and behaviours. It is a continuous and long-term process that requires political will and commitment of all parties in order to create an inclusive, aware and competent society to promote gender equality.

The objective of this Virtual Dialogue was to reflect on the nature and causes of resistances to training for gender equality, as well as strategies for overcoming resistances and harnessing them for transformative change. Resistance is understood as “a phenomenon that emerges in processes of change and that is aimed at maintaining the status quo, against change.”<sup>1</sup>

The key issues and objectives of the Virtual Dialogue are set out at length in the [Concept Note](#), circulated widely in advance. Discussions were guided by four substantive questions:

1. *What kinds of resistances are manifested during training for gender equality?*
2. *What tools and strategies can be shared for dealing with different kinds of resistances?*
3. *What kinds of resistances are manifested by the organisations in which training takes place and how can these be addressed?*
4. *How can resistances be harnessed as an essential component of transformation in training for gender equality?*

The aim of this report is to provide an analytical synthesis of the discussions during the Virtual Dialogue and to explore ideas for future research and debate on resistances to training for gender equality.

Building on the format first used in the fifth dialogue, this Virtual Dialogue commenced with a [live online discussion panel](#). Three invited speakers gave short presentations on their experiences and responded to key questions.

**Professor Elisabeth Prügl, Director of the “Gender Experts and Gender Expertise” project, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva**

- Gender training is politics. Training is not just a technical tool, it is a political act.
- Resistance to gender training results from the fact that such training is highly political.
- Treating gender training as a form of democratic politics may help to deal with resistances.
- If gender training can approximate the following principles, we will be able to identify resistances, and re-channel them into a path for deliberation, turning them into a resource for democratic practice:
  1. Rational deliberation across difference that is open to a change in being. The goal is understanding, requiring openness to changing points of view based on the strength of the argument, as well as to changing the way we are and our forms of being.
  2. Non-coercion and equality in deliberation while enabling feminist social criticism. As training often occurs in coercive contexts, like highly-gendered organisations, reason and logic must prevail over displays of power. Feminist social criticism should precede democratic deliberation. This is interesting in terms of the trainer-trainee relationship.
  3. Inclusiveness of diverse forms of knowledge, especially of the marginalised, while working in partnership and in a participatory manner for collective validation. We should acknowledge that truth does not exist independently but is arrived at through collective valorisation.
  4. Reflexivity vis-à-vis processes and epistemic commitments. We need to be reflective about the power relations we are embedded in, e.g. class differences, post-colonial locations, race privileges, and our epistemic power. The latter must particularly be recognised by trainers.

**Dr Lut Mergaert, Research Director, Yellow Window, Antwerp**

- It is useful to understand *what* people are resisting when they manifest resistances in gender training. Three broad categories of (individual) resistance may be distinguished:
  - Training-related resistances, e.g. trainees may find it too theoretical or without practical value for their work, or be disturbed if the trainer is ignorant of their professional context.
  - Context-related resistances, i.e. against expectations which trainees feel unable to fulfil. They fear they lack resources/expertise, or sense contradictions between training messages and organisational gender blindness. Resistance is based on a feeling of incapacity.
  - Gender-specific resistances, i.e. be resistance against the goal of gender equality itself. This very serious form could be expressed by participants denying problems of inequality.
- Institutional resistance is closely related to individual resistance. Indicators thereof include:
  - The context of the training, e.g. if training is not part of a wider gender mainstreaming strategy, it may serve as an alibi for the organisation and indicate institutional resistance.

- The immobility or unwillingness of an organisation to change, e.g. when those at the top want to maintain the status quo and do not allocate necessary resources to training.
- The conditions and modalities of the training, e.g. if it is too short, lacks resources, or there is no space for negotiation to optimise training. Participant complaints of a lack of time, resources, and support can also denote institutional resistance.
- Techniques to overcome resistance include providing clear facts, figures and examples, which are as close as possible to the participants' realities. The trainer must draw on his/her own knowledge.
- Trainers should listen carefully to participants' objections and ask questions to ascertain where the problem lies. When institutional or process-related elements like a lack of resources are at play, participants could be invited to find solutions together in group discussions.
- It is helpful to make resistances visible and investigate their causes so as to find solutions. This contributes to the effectiveness of gender training and the wider gender mainstreaming strategy.

***Professor Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, Researcher, Gender Trainer, and author of the 2007 book *Revisiting Gender Training, 2007, KIT, The Netherlands****

- In terms of the origins of resistance, there are four main sources from which resistance arises:
  - Differing meanings of gender and gender equality; e.g. equality as sameness; affirming difference from the male norm; and equality as transforming all established gender norms.
  - Epistemological differences. Gender equality is especially challenging in institutions whose core business is scientific or technical. Resistances concern how evidence of gender equality is constructed, and how relevant this is to the core business of the institution.
  - Opposing the power of global discourses. Resistance is manifest by developing country bureaucrats who face increasing conditions from donors and international agencies. This also entails resistance against a universal ideal, which is difficult to translate across contexts.
  - The gendered self. As we are all gendered and have opinions about gender, this is source of tension when training programmes lack the time to explore individual understandings.
- To overcome resistance, a focus is needed on the core business of the institution commissioning the training. Trainers must be knowledgeable about the sector they are dealing with.
- Time should be spent on gender analysis rather than solely on tools and procedures to mainstream gender. Training is not just about the mechanics of doing gender, but the politics of doing gender and the understanding of social relations.
- Trainers must allow for debate on gender concepts, even in short training sessions. This is critical as universal standards of gender equality have meant little in the real world. One way to address gender subjectivity is to hold structured feedback sessions and ask resistant participants to lead discussions.
- Trainer autonomy must be asserted in the face of interventionism by institutions.

Following these presentations, the Moderator, [Lucy Ferguson](#), posed questions on behalf of participants to generate debate between the panellists.

***Q: Is the training of trainers a good way to start a larger capacity development process? To do this, we need to identify allies in an organisation, given a lack of resources. Do you have any examples of how to start such a capacity development process? (Elisabeth Robert, UN Women Training Centre)***

Lut: This is a good way to start a capacity-building process, but is not easy. Being a good gender trainer implies a number of capacities, e.g. strong adult training skills, a thorough knowledge of gender, and sufficient self-confidence to deal with resistances.

Maitrayee: This is a very good way to start a capacity-building process within an organisation. Those selected need certain skills - training doesn't come easily to everybody. An approach that has worked well for KIT involves training people from a single institution, and thinking through what gender equality or gender mainstreaming might mean in their organisations.

***Q: We need to enable debate, but what does this mean in terms of methodology? (Elisabeth Robert, UN Women Training Centre)***

Elisabeth: The debate really needs to be institution-wide.

Lut: A technique we use is to ask participants how they believe their colleagues will react when they say they have attended gender training and explain what they have learnt. They anticipate potential reactions and work out how to respond. A debate occurs automatically as they start mixing expected reactions from colleagues with their own preconceptions about the concepts addressed.

***Q: Is it a common practice to have gender balance in the teams of trainers conducting the gender training? And if not, why not? (Elena Valainyte, COP member)***

Lut: We don't systematically have gender balance, although we do have male trainers. The reason is a matter of cost; you double the cost when you have two trainers instead of one. Resources are limited and our one-day sessions have a single trainer, either a woman or a man.

Maitrayee: It is not common practice, but it is good practice to have two trainers, and a gender balanced team goes down well with trainees. I try to negotiate for more than one voice to expose participants to more experiences. With a male and a female trainer, the range of experiences increases. Often practical questions of cost arise.

***Q: Maitrayee, could you elaborate on how training is not a mechanic process but should be political? How do we do this within a short time frame? (Khamsavath Chantavysouk, UN Women Training Centre)***

Maitrayee: Real urgency to go beyond technical aspects. Not just about what gender means overall, but about asking participants what gender equality means to them. My most recent training experience was with high-level bureaucrats in Kurdistan, Iraq. We had an hour-long debate on whether gender equality was important for their 5-year plan. This made things more political because issues like what equality meant vis-à-vis the plan came up. I was willing to sacrifice time that would have gone into getting the 'correct' version of gender equality, or technical issues, across. It was more important that trainees convinced themselves that the plan will work given their own version of gender equality. We have to allow that debate. The politics of gender must be discussed.

Following the Webinar, a [recording](#) of the panel discussion was posted to the COP and a dedicated discussion group continued over the following week. This encouraged open debate and the sharing of resources, articles and tools between COP members. A summary of the key points is provided below.

### **Comments from the online discussion**

#### ***Understanding and conceptualising resistances***

- Training for gender equality seeks to transform individuals/institutions, gendered power, privileges, and hierarchies, and politicise practices and beliefs. As this has political and socio-economic implications, it is natural for the powerful and powerless (when oppression is entrenched) to resist.
- Resistance can be born from fear – fear of losing power and privileges, of uncertainties, of painful truth, of upsetting the status-quo, and of self-examination.
- The process of transformation through training is a difficult journey for both men and women.
- Understanding resistances helps us identify approaches to deal with them.
- As training is a transformative, collective learning process, resistances are bound to surface. Their appearance should not be alarming; in fact, it would only be a concern if none emerged at all.

#### ***Challenges***

- There is a challenge surrounding how to make theories accessible to those without higher education, without diluting their content.
- Funders who do not necessarily have specific funding lines for gender equality may be resistant.
- Institutions are reluctant to fund costly longer training programmes, but feminist activists and grassroots associations often lack the resources to do so.
- The de-politicisation and de-feminisation of gender training, particularly in Francophone countries, is precipitated by a lack of long-term trainings and trainers well-versed in both theory and practice.<sup>1</sup>
- Many training courses - both face-to-face and online - offer a 'gender digest' and do not press participants to read, analyse and compare theories.
- Gender training in a university-context is a challenge but also a powerful lever.<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Recommendations***

- We must capitalise on what we already know; thus repositories of information on training and development, particularly those concerning women, are vital.<sup>3</sup>
- Training initiatives must be linked to a broader process for transformation.
- There is a need to strengthen the theoretical basis for trainers.
- We should focus on the importance of participation in discussions and decision-making spaces.
- Approaches to resistances should entail providing safe space for dialogue and sharing points of view.
- We must search for common ground, e.g. by identifying mutual long-term benefits and/interests.
- It is useful to include the participation of male leaders in training initiatives.

- Moral and emotional support should be provided for the process of self-examination and reflection.
- Building mechanisms of collective learning and support, e.g. alliances, as well as mechanisms of accountability, are important.
- Dealing with resistances requires sincerity and honesty about losing power and privileges.
- Empathy and compassion are significant in helping to overcome resistances.
- Training within organisations is key, but training outside institutional contexts is also needed.

### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

This Virtual Dialogue is part of an on-going process of collective analysis and evaluation of training for gender equality. The discussions and reflections contributed will feed into wider debates in the UN Women Training Centre and support analytical work and identification of priorities for future activities.

Based on the findings of the Virtual Dialogue, a number of issues for future reflection can be identified:

1. How can resistances be incorporated into the methodological approaches of training for gender equality in order to harness their potential for advancing transformation?
2. How might we go about collecting and sharing good practices in tools and methods for harnessing resistances for transformation?
3. What kinds of standards and quality criteria are required to ensure that training for gender equality can adequately address resistances?

For more information on the COP and its activities, please see [here](#).

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> An article summarising training issues in Francophone countries may be found in the following 2007 KIT, The Netherlands, publication: [http://www.kit.nl/gender/wp-content/uploads/publications/1031\\_Gender-revisiting-web2.pdf](http://www.kit.nl/gender/wp-content/uploads/publications/1031_Gender-revisiting-web2.pdf) [see page 61].

<sup>2</sup> A discussion on this subject was recently held by *Genre en Action*: <http://www.genreenaction.net/spip.php?article9517>

<sup>3</sup> Such a repository can be found here: <http://www.genreenaction.net/spip.php?article7700>. This was triggered by a Symposium in 2006 ([http://www.genreenaction.net/IMG/pdf/Synthe\\_se.pdf](http://www.genreenaction.net/IMG/pdf/Synthe_se.pdf)) which prompted several actions on behalf of *Genre en Action*, in partnership with other organisations, including the repository and the IHEID e-training 'gender and development' course.