

# Disciplining Gender in Environmental Organizations: The Texts and Practices of Gender Mainstreaming

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Gender experts are being recruited and gender routinized in the everyday work of international environmental organizations today. To what extent do these changes open up spaces for reorienting sustainability debates in terms of normative commitments to promoting gender equality and justice? We explore this question by studying how gender is done in one such organization meant to work towards sustainability. We examine how work with gender is organized — the experts employed and their possibilities to influence events as well as how gender is addressed in the texts produced in the course of organizational work. We find that while abstractions for a global audience may distance debates on sustainability from people on the ground, contrary to current thinking, the depoliticized and disciplined narrative on gender can also open up a space for counter discourses on gender by providing a platform from which to destabilize dominant debates on sustainability. We suggest that a close analysis of the shaping of global and official discourses on sustainability can provide insights into how we may interrupt discourses that re/produce inequalities.

*Keywords:* mainstreaming, environmental organizations, sustainability, organizational texts, global discourses

## Introduction

'Gender' has become an important issue in global environmental governance. Institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations (UN) have been vocal about their concerns about the social and economic consequences of the 'gender gap' — exemplified by inequalities in wages, rights and conditions of men and women. Finances and attention are being directed to gender in development and environmental organizations and gender experts are being employed by several international environmental organizations to ensure that 'gender' is central to the work done in the organization (Arora-Jonsson, 2014). Gender is no longer meant to be something done on the side, but 'mainstreamed' in environmental and development activities.

The 'mainstreaming' of gender has been criticized by several feminists for bringing about a bureaucratization and depoliticization of a concept that is essentially political (Prugl, 2010; Hawthorne, 2004; Parpart *et al.*, 2000; Baden and Goetz, 1998). They have argued that the ways in which gender has been assimilated and standardized in organizations has led to a 'political obscurantism' of the term rather than it disrupting current relations of inequality, the original purpose of the mainstreaming project. While many feminist scholars appear to have 'written off' mainstreaming as an effective theory and strategy, international environmental organizations appear to be increasingly adopting 'gender mainstreaming' and employing 'gender experts' within their organizations.

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Gender mainstreaming in international environmental organizations is taking place in the context of a shift from inter-governmental politics to a global environmental governance. Global environmental governance is no longer confined to nation states but is characterized by the participation of actors other than central governments including networks of experts, environmental organizations, private interests and new agencies set up by governments. International environmental organizations have assumed an increasingly important place in this context. They have a significant impact on the environment and its governance and are poised to be important environmental mediators in the future (Biermann *et al.*, 2009). Answerable to no one state and having to negotiate between many masters, places certain constraints on such organizations, but it also allows them the freedom to take on issues and strategies denied to national organizations (Kurian, 2000). Thus, the current emphasis on gender mainstreaming by such organizations has important consequences for gendering debates on environmental sustainability.

We explore mainstreaming efforts in a study of one such environmental organization meant to work towards sustainability, the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and analyze its attempts to gender the discussion on sustainability in their texts. At the cusp of environmental practice and research, CIFOR members are tasked with producing knowledge about the environment for sustainable policies and practice. Drawing on literature on gender mainstreaming and gendering organizations, we study how gender is done in the texts produced by the organization, that is, how gender gets written in or not in organizational texts and in what ways. In parallel with this, we also examine the practices of gender experts meant to ensure that gendered concerns are reflected in the organization's work. More specifically, we analyze the increasing presence of gender experts in environmental organizations and ask, to what extent can these experts use their increasing presence within the organization to reorient the sustainability debate in terms of normative commitments to promote equality and justice? We turn to what their 'writing in' of a language on gender might imply for everyday work in environmental organizations and for the possibilities of unsettling mainstream 'rational and neutral' environmental narratives in order to repoliticize gender in organizations and challenge inequalities in our discussions on sustainability.

## Mainstreaming gender and gendering organizations

The tension between the increasing disciplining and professionalization of gender within environmental organizations and the possibilities for gender experts to 'create discursive space in which new, more equitable possibilities may emerge' (Fletcher *et al.*, 2009, p. 82), is becoming increasingly tangible in the work of gender experts expected to mainstream gender within organizations. We draw on two intersecting bodies of literature in our analyses of these tensions: on gender mainstreaming that has focused on the incorporation of gender perspectives in organizational routines of organizations and the stream of literature on gendered organizations that focuses on the language and texts produced by the organization, especially with an intersectional perspective. We explore the struggles over language that are embedded in relationships of power within the organization, but also within the larger arena of environmental governance when 'gender' can become a lever for increased influence.

### *Mainstreaming gender in organizations*

Gender mainstreaming, approved as part of the platform of the 1996 UN Women's Conference in Beijing is based on principles of gender equality through the transformation of gender relations pervading all social institutions, and through integrating a gender perspective into all analyses. Gender mainstreaming is in many ways haunted by the tension of wanting to be 'mainstream' at the same time as changing the mainstream. Walby (2005, p. 325) writes that 'one vision of gender mainstreaming is that it offers "transformation" (Rees, 1998), that is, neither the assimilation of women into men's ways, nor the maintenance of a dualism between women and men, but rather

something new, a positive form of melding, in which the outsiders, feminists, change the mainstream.'

However, scholars point out that gender sensitive language and generalizations about including gender aspects in program documents have not necessarily meant concrete change on the ground (Prugl, 2010). In the field of development in particular, feminists have shown how gender tends to get bureaucratized with mainstreaming rather than a political project that addresses gendered inequalities (Parpart *et al.*, 2000). Critiques of gender mainstreaming have centred on its taken-for-granted assumptions about heteronormative processes with women and men always in unequal positions that tend to reinforce existing gendered processes (Davids *et al.*, 2014). The dilution of its political implications has been aided by what Baden and Goetz call the men at risk backlash where mainstreaming is stifled by assertions that the focus on women's rights places men in a neglected position (Baden and Goetz, 1998).

Scholars also point to a more insidious side of mainstreaming in relation to policy. They criticize development initiatives for taking on board certain ideas about 'gender' when they serve larger patriarchal environmental agendas (e.g. Leach, 2007). Hawthorne (2004) criticizes mainstreaming for directing attention away from women's unequal positions and for becoming a case of assimilation. She argues that gender mainstreaming allows bureaucracies to appropriate feminist language, to insert that feminist language into official 'gender' documents and then do nothing. To her, in this political obscurantism, the vibrancy of feminist language is lost. For others, bureaucracies, by their very nature, are antithetical to feminist concerns and incompatible with feminist goals (Small, 1997; Ferguson, 1993).

Nonetheless, as True (2003) argues, feminists cannot afford not to engage with powerful institutions when the application of gender analysis in their policymaking is clearly having political effects beyond academic and feminist communities. Pollack and Hafner-Burton (2010) show that there is a strong causal link between the use of hard incentives for gender mainstreaming and international organizations' performance in these and related mandates. We examine how this might work within CIFOR.

Davids *et al.* (2014) advocate the rethinking of the revolutionary feminist promise of mainstreaming and its underlying subject theory. In breaking away from a utopian vision of change, they argue that gender mainstreaming can be considered part of what they label a slow revolution towards social justice. Given the hard incentives at CIFOR, we examine the possibilities for this slow revolution as we turn to the work of the gender experts and the text and writing on gender in international organizations. To our minds, 'language is not simply representative of meanings but constitutive of how we think. It is malleable and ambiguous — a single term can signify a multiplicity of things and ideas' (Calás and Smircich, 2006, p. 309). As we discuss further, discourse — the system of meanings that bounds what can be said or not on a particular subject (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010) — is complicit in how material power is exercised and power relations perpetuated or disturbed. It is to a discussion of discourse and language as a carrier of social practices that we turn to in the next section.

### *Writing gender for sustainability*

While scholars have written about the gendered nature of organizations, less attention has been directed to how the text produced in the course of organizational work is gendered (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015). A focus on the rhetorical nature of texts casts suspicion on the 'proclaimed objectivity and universality of organizational knowledge'. 'Texts/language that produce "organizational knowledge" are not naïve or innocent, but rather engaged in a politics of representation that gender organizations' (Calás and Smircich, 2006, p. 314). Poststructuralist and postmodern feminists within organizational theory demonstrate how masculinity is the unstated but present norm in knowledge construction and offer suggestions for how such knowledge could be re-written (Calás *et al.*, 2014).

Phillips (2014) argues that discursive formations that prioritize rational, technical and masculinist approaches wipe out affective engagements with the natural environment as well as a multitude of

voices and deeper questioning that might bring about a radical change in relation to sustainability. According to Pullen and Rhodes (2015), the privileging of such a style of writing in organizational studies has come to be seen as gender neutral and mandatory. They call for a writing of organization that defies rational categorization so as to enable a multitude of affectual voices and texts to cross over from exclusion. This makes it interesting to analyze how gender and power that necessitate working with subjectivity and sexuality is incorporated into the content (and texts) of the rational organization. In the work of CIFOR, we examine how some of these contradictions of the rational and the subjective surface in relation to the efficacy of quantitative contra qualitative work, especially in the context of needing to present 'global studies' that go beyond the local to inform policy at a more abstract level.

The contestation or struggles over meanings of sustainability and gender takes place in discourse, a key term in poststructuralist analysis. Discourse, as understood here, refers to relatively bounded, socially produced forms of knowledge that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about a given social object (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010), in our case, on gender and sustainability. Discourse is thus meanings that matter (Ashcraft and Harris, 2014) where the textual and material meet and shape the tangible realities of work and organizational life. Discourses can lay the boundaries for social practices that address the world of work and organization. These may also be seen to produce or monitor organizational identities. Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 3) argue that as organizational leadership acts to define discourses, such organizational identification effectively acts to reduce the range of decision of its members, as choice is, in principle, confined to alternatives that are assessed to be compatible with affirming such identification.

In contrast, in our analysis of CIFOR's texts, we explore the possibility of having multiple voices (Calás and Smircich, 2006) in organizational debates on sustainability. Scholars have called for the need for systemic intersectional analyses of inequality characterized by a critical look at how power is exercised simultaneously in several spheres of influence and how these systems of inequality are institutionalized (Holvino, 2010). We examine if – although organizational identification may discipline (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) gender within the organization in static narratives on men and women – the current emphasis on gender mainstreaming might also open up the space for an analysis of gendering processes in relation to other dimensions of power, and in fact, expand the range of decision in work with sustainability.

However, it is important to understand how the field of environmental governance impinges on the work within CIFOR in relation to mainstreaming and organizational identification. Acker (2004) underscores the need for closer attention to the gendered processes and ideologies embedded in globalizing capitalism. In a somewhat similar vein, we analyze instead, how debates in the arena of global environmental governance and the position of CIFOR as an actor in that arena are implicit in the knowledge produced by CIFOR on gender and the environment, just as much as CIFOR too shapes larger environmental and forestry debates. It demands an understanding of how research and policy are themselves constitutive of reality through their construction of categories such as 'men' or 'women', poor or local and are potentially gendering, racializing, heteronorming, classing or third worlding (Bacchi, 2016).

We reflect on whether writing texts that also look to the emotional and that which is associated with the body (Phillips, 2014) and to intersecting dimensions of power (Holvino, 2010) might bring about a retexturing of debates on sustainability? Generalizations about women's vulnerability and virtuousness in the literature on the environment in the past have led to taken for granted assumptions about all men and women rather than attention to systemic relations that produce inequalities. These have led to standardized solutions for people who have little use for them or in many cases, had further negative impacts (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Writing in emotional and embodied experiences of people means turning away from this 'largely exclusive focus on instrumental rationality to embrace multiplicity, emotion and corporeal responses to the worlds in which we live' (Phillips, 2014, p. 452). It also demands attention to the unstable, complex and ambiguous 'nature' of social reality (de Lauretis, 1989) and the intersecting relations of power such as those based on nationality, age, race or class that shape people's everyday lives.

Matters of style and genre are gendered. Gender experts in environmental organizations are caught in a bind — feeling the need to adopt mainstream language and rationality to be able to speak to the others and to be heard as much as they try and contest it. We examine this in the case of CIFOR and reflect on how one can challenge mainstream writing at the same time as maintaining one's position within the organization. A different discourse and practice is possible and in the next section, we describe how we went about studying some of those attempts.

## Methodology

We adopt an action research oriented approach in this paper as we analyze the context of gender mainstreaming where we have been involved ourselves as actors, although in different ways. The paper builds on conversations between us, one in an academic institution but also engaged in work outside the academy and the other working within CIFOR. Our conversations arose out of a discussion on the relevance of gender theories to everyday work in environmental organizations. Between October 2015 and the present we have met and communicated by Skype and e-mail to discuss these questions wherein Seema (at the university) has posed questions to Bimbika (at CIFOR) about her work and theorized the discussion in relation to the literature. In March 2016, we organized a session on Disciplining Gender at an environmental conference in Stockholm, Sweden, for which we wrote the first draft of this paper.

Seema draws on her experiences of collaboration with CIFOR over the years: invited as a gender 'expert' to discuss gender with forest officers in 2006, to a meeting on the new gender strategy for the larger Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers (CGIAR) network in 2012 and on her collaboration with Bimbika who joined the organization in 2013. Seema also draws upon her conversations with staff working with gender at CIFOR at these meetings as well as on an interview with the officer who had been central in pushing gendered concerns in the organization. Building on past conversations, the interview was carried out through e-mails between March and July 2016 where Seema posed questions to the officer and they communicated back and forth on the discussion. The officer also commented on a draft of the paper.

Bimbika started as a post-doctoral researcher and in 2014 took over as gender coordinator. A large part of the material used in this paper builds upon Bimbika's personal work journal and on her memories and experiences of what people said, how things unfolded and its links to key debates in the field. Her journal entries (March 2013 — June 2016) focused on key events (CIFOR annual meeting of staff, high profile events hosted by the organization such as the 'Global Landscapes forum' at Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings), memorable interactions (such as process of writing grants, meeting with donors, exchanges with staff at various levels, formal meetings, gender workshops) and everyday discussions in informal spaces. Some entries were quotations whereas others were bullet points. Both of us are originally from the global South, one working in a Northern institution and the other in the international organization — making us aware of transnational relations and crossing cultural boundaries.

The question of gender is central to our work. We approach 'gender' in the organization in three overlapping ways — as an issue, as a category of analysis and as lived experience and textual practice (Arora-Jonsson, 2013). In analyzing gender as an issue within the organization and its research, we study how the organization takes up different understandings of gender and the routines and practices put in motion to mainstream gender in the organization. We trace how routines for working with gender changed in the organization over time and analyze work and the texts produced in the organization. Using gender as a category of analysis, we examine how relationships of power are enacted in socially situated and textual practices in the organization. We regard gender not as a possession or attribute of people working in organizations, but the ways in which 'gender(ing) is an outcome or a co-production of organizing processes' (Calás *et al.*, 2014, p. 20).

We pay close attention to narratives on gender produced in the course of this co-production of organizing processes. This means that we analyze how stories about gender are represented and structured in the organization (Cortazzi, 1993) and examine documents on gender as performative

artefacts (Hancock and Tyler, 2007) and discourse (Bacchi, 2016) where gender as an image needs to be performed and that seeks to affect both people's impressions and definitions of reality. People's stories of their work with gender, how they organize their experiences and justify their actions and decisions form an important basis of our analysis. We are aware that we too are in the midst of making this discourse as we 'participate in the social relations that rule, not only people's lives but the construction of knowledge about them' (Campbell, 2016, p. 248) and try and reflect on this in our work.

In particular, we analyze the gender toolkits produced by the gender integration team, a report to bring in gender to a macro level written for a large research program, documents produced in the course of large global comparative studies and those written by the gender team. The toolkits and manuals provided guidance on how to develop gender-responsive research questions, collect data, analyze data and engage with relevant 'stakeholders'. In our analysis, we outline three main narratives on gender in the organization — in the instrumentalization of gender, the need for a global language and the narrative of gender as always a binary. But, as we show these narratives are also contested and just as gender research might adopt mainstream language, the mainstream is in a process of change.

### The organization: CIFOR as transnational space

CIFOR is a non-profit organization that conducts research on forestry and landscape management challenges around the world. CIFOR was established in 1993 amidst growing concerns about rapid deforestation and its associated costs to society in social, economic and environmental terms. It aims to help policymakers, practitioners and communities make decisions based on scientific studies about how they can use and manage their forests and landscapes in a way that improves human wellbeing, protects the environment and enhances equity. At the intersection of the development and academic world, the organization was described by a previous director as not doing 'applied' work, but rather 'strategic' work, that is, as mid-way between applied and academic work that had to be more conceptual and theoretical than applied work, but also directly relevant for applied concerns. CIFOR describes itself as using a global, multidisciplinary approach to advance research and impact in more than 50 countries on six themes: forests and human wellbeing; sustainable landscapes and food; equal opportunities; gender, justice and tenure; value chains, finance and investments; and forest management and restoration.<sup>1</sup>

CIFOR is headquartered in Bogor, Indonesia and symbolizes a 'transnational space' that exists beyond single nation states with staff from multiple countries, multiple funders and work conducted in different parts of the world. Day-to-day operations at headquarters are taken care of by a management group including the Director General and the heads of six research themes. A recent reorganization resulted in several nationalities from the global South being represented in the management group that was previously dominated by men from the global North. Place of education is an important marker in the organization and this is related to class. Most researchers in the organization, albeit from different nationalities, have a background in universities in the global North, especially from the US and Europe. Out of the 14 members of the management group, four are women. Every year the CGIAR compiles statistics on gender representation and CIFOR has been under some pressure to hire women and also people from the global South, with varying levels of success. On the whole, there have always been more white males and Christians from the global North in the organization. Like in other transnational spaces (Purkayastha, 2012), the existence of systems and structures of domination, control and privilege are not entirely supplanted in these spaces and have their own sustained raced/gendered/classed and other hierarchies.

### *CIFOR within the larger context of global environmental governance*

The general shift from intergovernmental politics to global governance including the emergence of environmental policy as a distinct field of international politics (Biermann *et al.*, 2009) is an important context for CIFOR's work. CIFOR is one of the 15 centres that make up the Consultative Group on

Agricultural Research (CGIAR Consortium)<sup>2</sup>, and it leads the CGIAR Research Program on 'Forests, Trees and Agroforestry' alongside three other CGIAR centres. It operates by raising funds from development donors from different countries directly and also receives core funding distributed through the CGIAR system. As most researchers have established relationships with their governmental counterparts, CIFOR is often invited to give a 'neutral/scientific' stance on key emerging and long-standing policy debates. What Biermann *et al.* (2009) predicted as the future role of international environmental organizations as powerful mediators in the arena of global governance is already the case for CIFOR.

This context however poses challenges for international organizations such as CIFOR. Although they themselves have been one of the driving forces behind the multi-actor global context, they are also much more affected by the changing context of world politics, in which 'lines of authority blur, levels of governance change and multiply where others besides national governments are increasingly important although they build on usually informal, sources of power and influence' (Biermann *et al.*, 2009, p. 2). While current discourses on ecological rationality and market solutions for environmental problems set boundaries for CIFOR's work, the organization too is part of creating those discourses.

CIFOR documents or 'knowledge products' are accessed by a number of researchers and practitioners, especially by non-governmental organizations. CIFOR has worked extensively with REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) — climate programs undertaken by UN agencies, national governments and non-governmental and private interests. The REDD+ books, based on research done by CIFOR have been downloaded more than 600,000 times. There are material ramifications of these discursive engagements. The discourses that CIFOR chooses to adopt determine the development funds it is able to access, the research partners it engages/supports financially or the policy actors/networks it chooses to engage with or tries to influence. Major funders routinely use CIFOR research to justify their programs and funding commitments. The increasing importance of the environment in international politics also makes it incumbent upon CIFOR to mark their territory. Their focus on providing global solutions is an important part of this work and gender expertise as their strength or 'flagship' in this changing context.

## Gender in CIFOR

Gender at CIFOR in the 1990s was driven largely by a feminist anthropologist in the organization. She pushed to apply feminist thinking on research within the organization and collaborated with a select group of researchers, both within and outside the organization to produce a steady volume of 'knowledge products' on gender and forestry. Often, she was the only senior member of the organization advocating a gender approach at meetings.

As a consequence of some of this work, CIFOR supported long-term ethnographic research on gender dynamics within agricultural communities and studied how gender dynamics influenced livelihoods and resources. One program relied on a participatory methodology called Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM). ACM was used to enhance women's and marginalized groups' roles in decision-making in 11 countries where the program was implemented and track changes over time in their involvement in decision-making and the extent to which they could influence forest groups' priorities.

Notwithstanding these contributions, research on gender issues occupied a small and specialized niche within the overall organization. Although there were occasionally funds available from donors outside, gender was not a priority for most. In one case, the leadership diverted funds granted for gender research to be used for something totally different. Those who pushed for these issues felt they had to fight long, hard and repeatedly to keep their work going with the participatory project in the early to mid 2000s. This was despite the exemplary fit of the collaborative approach with many of the institution's self-imposed mandates such as partnerships, interdisciplinary policy work and people orientation. For eight years, the project leader had a place in the management group as staff representative and was given a voice in decision-making. The program was however 'tested' by outside

consultants, unlike in the case of other programs. On the whole, the program never did become a part of mainstream work and in that sense, much of this work was carried out at the margins of the organizations.

### *Changing times: mainstreaming and professionalizing gender at CIFOR*

In the late 2000s and in response to growing donor pressure to take gender more seriously in CIFOR's research programs and knowledge products, CIFOR's senior management decided to recruit a researcher from a prestigious university in the US to 'mainstream' gender across CIFOR's research programs. Subsequently, this gender expert collaborated alongside 'gender experts' in other CGIAR centres and academics to develop a gender strategy for the CGIAR research program on 'Forests, Trees and Agroforestry' (FTA) and Seema took part in one such expert meeting in 2012. The strategy served to outline how mainstreaming would be operationalized in all FTA research thematic areas, including on smallholder livelihoods, landscape management, forest restoration, climate change and trade and investments.

The gender strategy outlined a four-pronged approach, which included collecting gender disaggregated data and analysis, forming partnerships and alliances, knowledge sharing and adaptive learning. Senior management supported the strategy by recruiting new staff, instituted 'gender' in performance assessment of projects and programs, assigned budgets for gender in projects and made it mandatory to include a gendered approach in monitoring, evaluation and learning. They offered carrots and sticks for other researchers to consider the relevance of gender and supported systems for routinizing gender in activities such as proposal development and monitoring and evaluation.

New employees including Bimbika were recruited to the 'gender integration team' responsible for implementing the FTA gender strategy while other gender experts were made part of CIFOR research programs on climate change, smallholder livelihoods, forest management and tenure. The team comprising three women and one young man was responsible for helping other researchers (non-gender, social/biophysical scientists) to work with gender analysis in their projects while four other gender experts were responsible for enhancing gender-responsive research in specific projects/themes of which they were a part. The team was nested within a gender network that spanned the CGIAR comprising gender focal points in each organization who worked to embed gender within research projects at their centres. The team developed and commissioned toolkits and training to guide researchers at CIFOR to frame research questions in 'gender sensitive ways' and to employ a variety of research methods to analyze data. Their aim was to convince researchers in the organization that integrating gender was 'good science' and that they should at least collect sex-disaggregated data.

Senior management encouraged all researchers to attend the training. The senior management also started to monitor the performance of research teams in terms of how much budget they allocated to gender (at least 10 per cent), and whether they leveraged these funds to produce gender outputs — such as publications, blogs and events. Research teams seen as lagging behind were pressured to improve their performance by either leveraging support from the gender integration team and/or recruiting other staff members with gender expertise.

The gender team gained informal power within the organization and it was made part of CIFOR's internal proposal review and approval process. To ensure compliance with donor requirements, all CIFOR proposals for funding were first reviewed and approved internally by the finance group for budgeting, by the directors for content, analysis and deliverables and by the project management team for systems and procedures. The gender team was not a core member of the internal proposal review and approval process but was a part of all communications and hence, could intervene when it thought appropriate. Research teams working on proposals were encouraged to seek advice and support from the gender integration team. This tended to be when proposals required gender content or funders were known to support gender.

Gender Equality in Research Scale (GEIRS) was developed as part of CIFOR's monitoring, evaluation and learning system. GEIRS was a self-assessment tool to be filled out by project leaders and

their teams annually to monitor and evaluate the extent to which CIFOR's research was integrating gender in their projects and contributing to gender-relevant system level outcomes; because all research team leaders had to report on their activities and achievements, GEIRs served to routinize gender in the organization. In some respects, these shifts and spaces for gender inclusive change in CIFOR's research were a response to 'hard incentives' (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2010) imposed by donors. Many donors made an explicit commitment to advancing gender equality and demanded to see how CIFOR would further their gender commitments in project proposals, deliverables, communication and engagement strategies. All project managers who wished to secure funding needed to consider the relevance of gender, include a statement on gender and ensure that these accompany activities and budgets.

This shift in discourse within CIFOR was thus situated in larger discourses surrounding gender equality and women's empowerment in the global development agenda (Arora-Jonsson, 2014). From a fear that gender was slipping out of development considerations (Leach, 2007) in response to the natural scientific and technical focus on climate change in the first decade of 2000, concerns about gender equality and women's empowerment have emerged as an important part of post-2015 global development. One of the major pillars of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is gender equality and women's empowerment. In order to position itself to capture resources anticipated to follow the SDGs, CIFOR re-drew its organizational architecture to align with the SDGs. CIFOR's new vision and strategy profess to contribute to several SDGs, and not just the forestry-relevant ones, thus establishing its position clearly in the field.

The mainstreaming and professionalization of gender within the organization paralleled the contentious evolution of the organization as a whole. The employment of academics and the pressure to publish research in high impact journals within short time-frames led to an increased tension between producing academic research, meeting changing donor priorities and being seen as delivering development results — that is, informing decision-makers of CIFOR's research and assessing to what extent they use the information. The need to deliver results and publish in shorter time frames and keep abreast of policy meant that researchers opted for shorter periods of fieldwork and less participatory research that was time-consuming. Many newly recruited researchers did not have experience with action or collaborative research and tended not to work with such approaches although these fit well with CIFOR's agenda that sought to build on poor people's experiences of living with the forests. In the next section, we turn to some of these contradictions and study how gender is being adopted within the organization in such a context and its implications for gendering sustainability.

### *Contestation and change: responses to mainstreaming*

The mainstreaming of gender was absorbed by some but also contested within the organization. Trainings and toolkits received mixed reviews. Among some researchers, it opened up spaces for discussing gender issues, for inspiring thinking and creativity on applying gender concepts and methods in their work. One example was researchers studying value chains.<sup>3</sup> According to several members of the team, the trainings inspired them to collect data on women's roles in these value chains, write about why there were clear gender differences in what women and men did, the reasons why women's contributions were less valued and why women were concentrated in low-paid jobs.

In comparison, others lamented that the toolkits and trainings were very general and expected the gender integration team to provide tailored support. The team, in turn, interpreted such responses as acts of resistance by scientists unwilling to make changes that would reflect a gender approach. They felt that many were social scientists who are well versed in foundational texts on justice, equality and power relations and knew where to look for key debates and perspectives on the issues that they were interested in exploring in their work. However, when it came to gender, the same people suddenly need 'toolkits', 'trainings' and 'tailored support'.

There were also tensions among the gender experts. For some, the approach to gender mainstreaming at CIFOR was inherently colonial. The focus was on mainstreaming gender in relation to the concerns of 'forest dependent women out there', often painting those women's relationships

with men as unequal and vulnerable whereas gender inequalities embedded within their own organization were viewed as 'off limits'. There was a disjuncture between what the organization said and what it did. On the other hand, the increasing importance accorded to gender also signaled the opening up of a new space for doing things differently and re-orienting the organization to focus more clearly and explicitly on gender issues. Many senior researchers made a conscious effort to engage with the gender and environment literature. In the following section, we examine some of the many ways of doing gender in the field of environmental research and the different meanings assigned to gender in the process of gendering sustainability.

## Disciplining gender at CIFOR

There are a number of ways in which gender was performed within the organization. We focus on the practices and accompanying 'performative texts' (Hancock and Tyler, 2007) that demonstrate three overlapping and yet different narratives and understandings of 'gender' within the organization.

### *The instrumentalization of gender: what men do and what men say that women do*

Many researchers actively began to work with gender as they now had a platform or point of reference to relate to and also due to the increasing push to take on a gender agenda. For instance, team leaders of a CIFOR's Global Comparative Study mined through existing household dataset studies to test commonly held assumptions about how men and women accessed, managed and used forest products and situated them in gender and environment debates. The study relied on 33 PhD students to collect data based on standardized questionnaires in 24 countries covering the majority of tropical forests in Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, others at CIFOR criticized the study for seeking responses only from male heads of households despite growing feminist critique that households are configured in different ways and that such a person, even if he exists, may not accurately relay activities, behaviour and perceptions of other household members. One such critique was that, 'The gender paper relied on what men said women did and then found that women didn't do as much work as was previously assumed in the gender and forestry literature.'

The adoption of gender research also reflected an instrumental use. For instance, one researcher commented,

I was one of the people in my research team opposed to investing time and effort in collecting sex-disaggregated data and engaging with gender concepts and frameworks for data analysis. This is not because I didn't think that gender was relevant but I didn't think that it trumped other issues that I was interested in prioritizing in my work. But when I saw that people I look up to were considering gender more seriously and that their efforts had culminated in a paper that was widely appreciated, it was a turning point for me.

Gender was considered as an asset in environmental work that could be added on to give researchers an edge over business as usual.

An instrumental attitude was also evident among the gender team. When CIFOR started mainstreaming gender, the gender experts felt a need to rationalize and legitimize this use of gender. This is particularly evident in the following quote from the toolkit 'Integrating Gender into forestry research: A Guide to CIFOR Scientists and Program Administrators', which was in turn used as a basis for conducting trainings and 'gender' capacity-building events at CIFOR: 'Policies and interventions in the forestry sector have . . . overlooked women's knowledge of forest resources, their role in managing them, and their dependence on forest resources for their livelihoods and wellbeing.' The importance of paying attention to gender and including women were made on instrumental grounds, 'women's participation in forest management improves governance, resource allocation and sustainability of forest products . . . ignoring gender differences in forest use and management can lead to less effective policies. Both women's and men's activities contribute to household livelihoods.' The 'gender experts' who wrote these manuals or commissioned them out to others,

were aware that there were multiple interpretations and debates on each of the issues covered in the manual. Nevertheless, in an effort to incentivize an interdisciplinary staff body, the manuals were promoted as representing the 'state of the art literature' and/or scientific truths that reflected consensus rather than contention and debate.

As a result of the increasing traction of gender in environmental discourse and greater visibility and resources, a women's questionnaire was framed for a CIFOR flagship project, the Global Comparative Study on the international climate program on REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation+). Preliminary findings were presented at CIFOR-supported global events such as the 'Gender Pavilion' organized jointly with other organizations at the COP 2015 meeting in Paris, thus highlighting the importance of gender at such global events. While this instrumental use of gender has its disadvantages as have been amply demonstrated by critics of mainstreaming (e.g.s. Hawthorne, 2004; Parpart *et al.*, 2000), these instances did bring the questions of gender for discussion centrally onto the mainstream environmental agenda in big public forums and onto debates about sustainability.

### *Gender for a global language: Where is the data in gendered narratives?*

Some changes became apparent among researchers at CIFOR who did not previously work with gender, such as the trade and investments team working on palm oil. These researchers led the growing stream of research at CIFOR on 'corporate commitments' and 'zero deforestation' movements and framed their research in terms of whether corporations would adhere to their commitments and/or the extent to which smallholders would also profit from such movements. Gender was not considered despite the presence of social scientists with a strong commitment to furthering justice and equity. Team members would often say, 'I don't see how gender would be relevant beyond the household level. We are talking about the flow of trade and investments. What would a gender perspective add?'

Nevertheless, as CIFOR had to report on how much funds were allocated for gender research in each of the research streams, it was clear that none/very little had been allocated within the trade and investment research stream. Hence, senior management put pressure on the team to integrate gender and Bimbika was brought in to provide support. She commissioned a paper on gender and oil palm plantations by a well-known academic. The gender team partnered with Oxfam to review the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) Principles and Criteria and recruited a post-doc to conduct research on gender and large-scale land acquisition in Sub-Saharan Africa in collaboration with scholars in other CGIAR centres. They also developed a memorandum of understanding with a university in Indonesia to do research on this topic. The university hoped to use the research to inform their advocacy on women's rights in large scale land acquisitions. During a CIFOR retreat, the theme leader of the oil palm research mentioned that he was impressed with the benefits that came along with bringing a gender person on board in terms of partnerships, engagement and funding. While infusing a gender perspective did not necessarily mean that CIFOR's discourse on zero deforestation moved beyond 'sustainability' and 'environmental growth' to also consider 'gender equality,' gender was, nonetheless, on the agenda and recognized as a legitimate issue on which to conduct further research. These changes resulted in texts distinct from CIFOR's usual publications and reflected greater engagement with feminist theories and feminist politics.

There was nonetheless a difference in the language of the two research agendas and hence of the questions they asked. The political economists who led the research tended to celebrate zero deforestation pledges and corporate commitments and were concerned with questions about implementation, impacts on smallholders and environmental versus development outcomes. There was a recognition that there were important trade-offs and that the desired outcomes needed to be reconciled. In contrast, the core questions that the gender paper on oil palm asked concerned Who benefited?, Who did not? and Why? from oil palm expansion.

Although the gender research resonated with the rest of the team, they differed in two important ways. First, the gender text took a more micro-perspective and unpacked many categories such as

'workers', 'indigenous communities' and 'migrants'. Second, it privileged narratives and stories in the analysis and highlighted embodied experiences of differently situated women and men living with oil palm whereas the rest of the oil palm group focused more on numbers that they felt could be verified and replicated. There was an important disciplinary or rather methodological difference and it was particularly clear when a member of the oil palm team reviewed the gender paper. One of the fundamental questions that he posed was: Where is the data (quantitative) to back up your assertions?

This difference reflects a longstanding cleavage in gender mainstreaming attempts. While narratives that revealed subjectivities and experiences underlying major development initiatives were recognized, to be able to present a report on trade to a global audience, these narratives were considered inadequate. As has been the case in the past, such data (not considered hard and reliable) are often kept separate from the core project data. Gender analyses are often located in a separate document that is usually only accessed and used by those who already have gender on the agenda (Das Pradhan, 2004). The oil palm team intended to speak to a global audience and to a discourse that did not have place for this complexity.

And yet, that the team was forced to acknowledge the need for a gender perspective initiated a conversation that went beyond the 'legitimacy and authority afforded by quantitative work that normally counts as rigorous and legitimate knowledge production in the field of their work and organization' (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016, p. 206). The gender report spoke across scale and across the micro and macro split by contextualizing the data the team had gathered, enabling 'a multitude of affectual voices and texts' (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015, p. 87) and shifted the focus to people's everyday experiences and needs. The different texts also bring up the question of the power of the researchers in constructing global narratives, that they do not merely represent 'reality' but are in fact constitutive of it as they construct the categories of their research. This becomes all the clearer in the REDD+ project described in the next section.

### *Writing gender for policy: the need for binaries*

The increased attention to gender has come about at the same time as an increasing focus on solving environmental problems through the means of the market, for example by protecting the environment through the sale of ecosystem services. This discourse was evident in the REDD+ study, 'The aim is to inform the REDD+ policy arenas and practitioner communities with evidence, analysis, and tools so as to ensure 3E+ outcomes: (carbon-)Effectiveness, (cost-)Efficiency and Equity as well as co-benefits.' Through comparative studies of the implementation of REDD+ around the world, the GCS REDD+ project takes stock of international, national and subnational REDD+ experiences to identify challenges and opportunities in designing and implementing effective, efficient, and equitable REDD+ policies and projects.<sup>4</sup>

The text above did not relate to critical research on REDD+ and carbon forestry, in themselves contentious issues (see McAfee, 2012). A central tension is CIFOR's interest in establishing itself as a 'global research institute' and to be able to respond to 'global' environmental needs, had resulted in several global comparative studies that used standardized methods across countries and contexts rather than localized and in-depth research. The 'neutral approach' to REDD+ and acceptance of mainstream rhetoric left less space for an analysis of the politics of REDD+ programs or how they are part of constructing the new environmental context that is changing people's livelihoods as well as their rights and responsibilities (Arora-Jonsson *et al.*, 2016). Writing differently in this case would have implied also considering what different groups of people might feel are efficient and effective ways or what equity means for them. Importantly, it would need more attention to how the programs construct different social categories and the context itself.

As part of the REDD+ research, a 'women's survey' was carried out, a structured focus group discussion with 'women' selected by village leaders. The survey was administered twice — pre REDD+ and post REDD+ projects and asked questions about women's perceptions of REDD+, inclusion or exclusion, their hopes and worries. Their findings indicated that most women were not involved in

programs. The women's survey was an afterthought in many ways, privileging numbers as opposed to narratives. While also important to consider, the standardized questions from Indonesia to Peru and the binary view of gender (women versus men), precluded an understanding of different women and men's experiences in relation to the projects that were taken for granted or how intersecting axes of power produced inequalities for different women and men and to be able to address them.

Even if gender experts at CIFOR acknowledged theories on intersectionality, there was a lack of consensus on how to apply them to the research and analyses that they undertake. As a consequence, research tended to be framed in terms of capturing 'women's role in REDD+' rather than on how gender and power relations impinged on variable interests and participation in the REDD+ process. As some researchers pointed out in a paper, '... though we recognize that "women" are heterogeneous, the data used for this analysis is based on group interviews, and it is therefore, not possible to consider differentiation among women in this article'. From the perspective of researchers engaged in policy-oriented research, it was easier to collect data from a binary perspective where a certain level of abstraction is necessary.

There was also concern that unpacking gender would dilute the attention on gender equality as it might be coopted by some who privileged other social relations over gender, thus diluting their efforts and work in this area. There was an apprehension that 'intersectionality' would make it difficult to rally support from donors and within the organization for 'gender'. Nevertheless, the gender experts did bring an intersectional approach to gender analysis such as in the oil palm research described above and encouraged researchers to consider intersecting categories. One way was to insert 'who' questions strategically in areas that focused on livelihood, tenure, labour profile and to seek plural voices in the household, that is, to interview both male and female members. The gender team is in the midst of producing a manual on intersectionality for researchers in the organization that takes up questions of race, gender, nationality and class, often by referring to past incidents within the organization itself. They hope to prompt discussions on how researchers are a part of creating racial, gendered or other processes both in their research and within the organization. All these changes co-exist alongside undifferentiated discourses of 'smallholders', 'farmers', 'entrepreneurs' in the majority of texts that continue to be produced by the organization. The forces pulling at those working to bring gender into the organization and influence sustainability have led to diverging views. Nevertheless, gender in all its varied forms is fairly central on the agenda.

## Discussion: changing the narrative

As global environmental governance and debates on sustainability take on a gender agenda, an examination of the work on gender, of organizations tasked with bringing about sustainability, is vital. Within CIFOR, global environmental governance has necessitated a push for 'global knowledge' on the environment. The accompanying focus on gender is driven by the exigencies of the organization where 'gender' is an asset in resource procurement and a source of funding. This has significantly changed the context for gender experts in working to gender sustainability debates. The importance attributed to gender has been important in the work of the organization, but it has also created a dissonance as gender as an examination of power relations fits in uncomfortably with the mainstream policy-driven or economics-based knowledge systems. This tension between producing gendered knowledge close to the ground and speaking to a global audience has affected work with gender in three important ways.

First, as is clear from the preceding case discussion, as the organization goes global, the local can tend to become static. The level of abstraction that is felt to be needed to present results from around the globe for a global audience entails that the voices that the sustainability debate need become an abstraction. This is apparent in the acceptance of the mainstream positions on climate programs, in the gendered binaries that get frozen within large research projects and the instrumental use of gender. It is also apparent in the low importance of participatory approaches within the organization that require some form of surrender, of 'rendering oneself passive in order to be open, receptive' (Gherardi, 1995, p. 28) to the more chaotic, subjective and political world outside. The women and

men that research propounds to speak for become more distant. While they are ever present in the talk on sustainability, their experiences become increasingly distanced from the research that represents their concerns.

These developments resonate with feminist critiques that hold that mainstreaming brings about a depoliticization and bureaucratization of gender within organizations (Prugl, 2010; Hawthorne, 2004; Parpart *et al.*, 2000; Baden and Goetz, 1998). But as we see at CIFOR, multiple discursive spaces to debate gender also emerged within CIFOR as a result of both inside and outside mainstreaming pressures. The diffusion of gender specialization has led to gender being not only something that one person or a small group of people do. Multiple 'agents of change' — donors, top management, researchers, the gender experts — as well as hard incentives (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2010) cumulatively make a difference, emphasizing the importance of institutional support (Kurian, 2000). As Fletcher *et al.* (2009) write, the opening of these discursive spaces has the potential for creating new equitable opportunities.

Second, while this adding on of 'gender' to a given frame does not necessarily 'transform' the frame (Rees, 1998), it has opened up space that the gender experts and others have used to change or temper the narrative on sustainability in different ways in the projects mentioned above — introducing contradictions, uncertainties and intersecting categories of power that bring greater attention to the complex ways in which inequalities come about in environmental governance. They have done this by reaching out and basing themselves in wider networks of academics, government institutions and activists. It would appear, that contrary to current thinking, a certain amount of depoliticized mainstreaming of gender in the organization has been useful to establish it as a field of inquiry. It has brought in 'multiple voices' (Calás and Smircich, 2006) into mainstream debates that otherwise centre on undifferentiated stakeholders or smallholders and the primacy and neutrality of markets. The mainstreamed and depoliticized narratives of gender opened up space for a discussion of other narratives or counter discourses about gender. As opposed to reducing the range of decisions afforded by the identification with the organization (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), paradoxically, it helped to open up that range.

The depoliticization is however not benign. In order to secure their identities and positions and gaining reputable organizational presence, at different points, gender experts may also endorse instrumental 'norms and values that they might otherwise wish to discredit' (Pullen and Knights, 2007, p. 506) such as showing how gender leads to more effective work on sustainability. One indication is also that the new emphasis on gender in CIFOR has been focused on 'gender' out there rather than to question gender or power within the organization. This contradiction requires a continual reflexive stance of the registers in which we speak and both as individuals and at the organizational and systemic level. A careful attention to the narratives and language of gender is essential. An absence of that might ensure a presence in these debates for gender experts but with little left to say, as critics of mainstreaming have shown so convincingly.

Last, years of development and environmental work and research have made it clear that binary categories of oppressed women and privileged men do not hold in the everyday or in projects meant to ensure sustainability and equality (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Gender researchers working across the organizations in the CGIAR are aware of this and many see this as a disjuncture between feminist theory and practice. However, important concepts related to environmental inequities have often originated in activist work. Activists have coined notions such as environmental justice, ecological debt or food sovereignty. These have been adopted within the academy and academic research has in turn further applied them and supplied other related concepts, working in a mutually reinforcing way, co-producing a social sustainability science, furthering both academic scholarship and activism on environmental justice (Martinez-Alier *et al.*, 2014).

Rather than dismissing gender mainstreaming as a cooption or depoliticization of gender, our study brings insights to larger debates on both gender mainstreaming in organizations and the bureaucratization of sustainability. By paying close attention to both organizational practices and texts, the study of CIFOR serves to illustrate the limits of mainstreaming attempts in bringing about a transformation, but it also makes visible the spaces that mainstreaming may open up for contestation and

change. Our study provides vital insights into the different ways in which researchers and others constitute and shape global narratives and how spaces might be constructed to bring in multiple voices into sustainability debates.

As we show, the visibility of gender at global and international levels brought about by mainstreaming and the diffusion of gender among a larger group of people within the organization rather than only among gender experts provided a platform for multiple voices on gender and sustainability. Some gender experts used this platform as a space from which to destabilize dominant discourses in sustainability debates. They did so by tapping into their networks of activists, scholars and bureaucrats in an interconnected way to challenge the power dynamics that sustain systems of inequality (Holvino, 2010). At CIFOR, such approaches brought ambiguity into mainstream organizational work but also provided a platform for those wanting to work with gender. As a consequence, the spotlight was turned onto gender relations within the organization as well, bringing about the potential for a slow (gendered) revolution (Davids *et al.*, 2014) in business as usual.

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## Notes

1. <http://www.cifor.org/about-cifor/>
2. [www.cgiar.org](http://www.cgiar.org)
3. The process by which value is added to raw materials to create a finished product and then sold to customers.
4. <http://www.cifor.org/gcs/>

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