

When Fields Meet: What Peace Work Reveals About Gender Constraints in Environmental Management and Mainstreaming Sustainability

Despite recognizing that environmental challenges require both technical and social approaches, organizations consistently prioritize technical solutions over community-based and social interventions (Bansal & Song, 2017; Hoffman, 2003). This phenomenon persists even in organizations that successfully implement inclusive practices in other domains of their work. While scholars have noted this tendency, the environmental management literature lacks sufficient understanding of why technical approaches dominate or how to address these limitations (Starik & Rands, 1995). This study addresses this gap by examining how field-level gender institutionalization shapes environmental management practices, using the lens of an organization operating across multiple institutional fields. Drawing on four years of ethnographic fieldwork in an organization bridging peacebuilding and environmental sustainability, this research demonstrates how field-specific gender regimes fundamentally constrain environmental management approaches. The findings reveal a contrast between domains: while the organization's peacebuilding work benefits from institutionalized gender frameworks that promote inclusive decision-making and diverse knowledge integration, its environmental work lacks such institutional support, resulting in technical approaches that marginalize social and community-based knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

This study develops the concept of field-level gender regimes to explain these persistent patterns. Building on feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010) and Connell's (2005) gender regime theory, the research shows how different organizational fields institutionalize gender to varying degrees, creating contrasting logics that shape organizational practice. Organizational fields play crucial roles in shaping how organizations approach gender. The peacebuilding field has institutionalized gender mainstreaming through frameworks like the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which emerged from UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent frameworks that mandate gender considerations in funding, evaluation, and organizational practices (Cohn, 2008; Tryggestad, 2009). In contrast, the environmental sustainability field acknowledges gender dynamics but has yet to develop comprehensive institutional frameworks that embed gender-inclusive practices into organizational routines (Arora-Jonsson, 2014; MacGregor, 2017). This gap reflects broader challenges in mainstreaming sustainability, where failure to address gender creates constraints in addressing systemic organizational practices.

Empirical Context and Methods

The research centers on the Center for Transboundary Environmental Cooperation (C-TEC), a pseudonymous nonprofit organization operating at the intersection of peacebuilding and environmental sustainability in Israel and Palestine. Founded during the Oslo Peace Process, C-TEC addresses environmental management challenges through cross-border cooperation initiatives, engaging in what scholars term environmental peacebuilding (Dresse et al., 2019; Ide et al., 2021). Data collection employed ethnographic methods (Van Maanen, 2011) spanning 2020-2024, including over 170 participant observations of meetings, conferences, field visits, and organizational activities, plus 80 semi-structured interviews with organizational members and partners. The analysis used an abductive approach (Deterding & Waters, 2018; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), moving iteratively between empirical data and theory using theoretical sampling to identify contrasting gender dynamics across organizational domains.

Key Findings

The research shows how institutional donor requirements in the peacebuilding field create accountability mechanisms that embed gender-inclusive practices into organizational routines. Donor evaluation frameworks measure gender-related outcomes, gender quotas are

mandated, and funding requires demonstrated gender strategies. These mechanisms result in gender-balanced leadership, intentional recruitment practices, and organizational cultures that value diverse perspectives and participatory approaches, consistent with research on institutionalized gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding (Anderlini, 2007; Davies & True, 2019). In contrast, the environmental domain lacks robust institutional frameworks for gender mainstreaming. Environmental donors prioritize tangible, technical outcomes and readily overlook gender considerations. This institutional context cultivates organizational practices that privilege technical expertise, emphasize efficiency and replicability, and marginalize relational and community-oriented approaches. The organization's environmental work reflects patterns identified in environmental management literature, characterized by male-dominated leadership, assumptions of gender neutrality that mask male dominance, and success metrics centered on technological interventions (MacGregor, 2019).

The study identifies two key phenomena emerging from the data. First, organizational ecotones—spaces where competing gender regimes from different fields meet and interact, creating opportunities for hybrid practices but also generating tension. Drawing inspiration from ecological transition zones, these organizational spaces represent areas where different institutional logics intersect. Second, organizational-institutional entrepreneurs—actors who attempt to translate gender-inclusive practices across domains, building on concepts of institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009) but operating specifically at organizational-institutional boundaries.

Mid-level managers, particularly women with experience in both domains, incorporate gender commitments into grant applications, recruit leaders with gender expertise from the peace domain, and develop hybrid projects that blend technical and relational approaches. One notable example was the Environmental Professionals Network, which emphasized gender equality, dialogue-based engagement, and community-oriented solutions while addressing environmental challenges. However, these entrepreneurial efforts face significant constraints. Without field-level institutional support, hybrid initiatives struggle to gain recognition and resources from senior leadership. The Environmental Professionals Network, despite its innovative approach and diverse membership, was ultimately discontinued because it did not align with the organization's dominant logic of efficiency and tangible deliverables. This outcome demonstrates how field-level dynamics constrain organizational innovation when competing institutional logics clash (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Implications and Contributions

This research explains why technical approaches persist in environmental management by demonstrating how field-level dynamics privilege certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others, extending work on institutional complexity and diverse approaches to sustainability challenges (Hoffman & Jennings, 2015; Hoffman, 2003; Starik & Rands, 1995). For gender and sustainability literature, the study shows how lack of field-level gender institutionalization creates structural constraints that limit organizational inclusion efforts, showing that sustainable change requires both individual agency and supportive institutional frameworks (Benschop & van den Brink, 2013). The concepts of organizational ecotones and organizational-institutional entrepreneurs provide frameworks for understanding how organizations navigate competing institutional demands while creating spaces for innovation. However, the findings reveal limitations of individual agency without field-level support, suggesting that sustainable change requires broader institutional transformation alongside organizational entrepreneurship. For practitioners, the research indicates that advancing effective environmental solutions requires more than symbolic gender engagement; organizations can leverage gender mainstreaming expertise across fields, but such efforts need institutional legitimacy and leadership support to succeed.

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