

# Alice in *Genderland*

## - Exploring gender practices

By Matilda Rizopulos

**This paper explores the practices of gender and gender equality within Dutch development organizations. Then you might think; What does this have to do with Alice in Wonderland or Genderland?**

The classic story of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll is about a girl named Alice who falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world populated by peculiar creatures. The underlying story is the development of the girl Alice from an undisciplined young child to a wise young woman. Alice finds these changes to be traumatic, and feels discomfort, frustration, and sadness when she goes through them. In the book *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice encounters a series of puzzles that seem to have no clear solutions. Alice expects that the situations she encounters will make a certain kind of sense, but they repeatedly frustrate her ability to figure out Wonderland.

*Curious, nonsense, and confusing* are the words that Alice uses to describe phenomena she has trouble explaining. She endures the experiences that are curious or confusing, hoping to gain a clearer picture of how that experience functions in the world.<sup>1</sup>

The story of *Alice in Genderland* has a different setting. Alice is in this story representing seven Dutch development organizations participating in the research project and their journey through Genderland (the gender theme). Gender normally refers to the socio-cultural definitions of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles and responsibilities. Genderland is as Wonderland filled with puzzles which do not seem to have a clear solution. For example, Alice does not know how to 'do' gender - how to translate information and policies into practice and action. Mostly because it is very context-, area- and subject specific. It is also political and has to do with power, relations and social change, which are sensitive issues to address. These are all things

that makes Alice *curious* and *confused* at the same time. She feels that she does not have enough specific knowledge about subjects of Genderland and therefore she gets lost in the new world. Even though the knowledgeable creatures, the so called gender experts, tell her a lot about Genderland, Alice feels that they talk in a language she cannot fully understand. A great frustration Alice also feels is the lack of time, the White Rabbit (can be interpreted as donor organization) who she encounters is stressing her by continuously looking at the watch and telling her to 'hurry, hurry', while she thought that exploring Genderland was a long term process. When the White Rabbit is quiet she takes the time to connect with others in Genderland; these Gender Networks give her more confidence and directions on how to continue exploring. Alice is feeling she can share her thoughts and get something in return. Although, outside the network she feels sometimes lonely while exploring. Alice wonders why not more individuals/creatures in Genderland feel the urge to know and do more with its diversity. Everyone in Genderland explains that they are surely committed to their land but Alice just wishes that it would be a collective effort with a higher priority.

The metaphor of Alice in Genderland was used in the paper to explain the challenges that seven Dutch development organizations are confronted with. These organization have participated in a thesis research project done by the student Matilda Rizopulos at Van Hall Larenstein.

As Alice is going through her journey in Wonderland, developing organization too are 'growing up' and getting wiser. Opportunities for learning and change are approaching especially through the commissioner of the research; PSO association, a capacity development and learning organization. PSO aims to use this research to investigate how they can further support the organization in the 'growing up' process. They see that through working together they can explore the magic of Genderland.

For more information visit [www.pso.nl](http://www.pso.nl)

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<sup>1</sup> SparkNotes Editors. (2005). SparkNote on Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Retrieved June 2, 2010, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/alice/>

*About the author:*

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