

Understanding gender relations

Guidelines for the development of gender sensitive interventions by agricultural researchers. Available from Christine Okali, see address at the end of this article.

Gender is often confused with sex but they are different. Sex is concerned only with the biological differences between men and women and these are fixed and unchangeable. Gender is about social relationships, not just between men and women but also between men and between women. These are shaped through the history of social relations and so the gender differences between men and women can and do change. They change over time and between cultures. While most people happily break society down into men, women, husbands and wives, few would go much further and consider the implications of differences reflected in marital status or education. A man may be adored by his mother, scorned by his teenage daughter, cherished by his sister, loved by his wife and respected by the community. In each situation, his gender relations will be different.

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So why is it important to understand gender relations and how they change? How can they be analysed? and what have they got to do with natural resources research? These and similar questions have been a familiar response to the introduction of this 'new' approach to gender analysis.

Natural resources based research has, in the past, paid little attention to gender and has focussed on increasing productivity and producing drudgery-reducing technology at low cost. An understanding that women play an important role in the management of natural resources is now well accepted but ways of introducing this into the research agenda is not so well understood.



Involving women in outreach trials has been one approach but running trials on farms and even encouraging women to manage them does not automatically translate into benefits for everyone. To plan research that is more relevant to women and to assess the implications of research for women, it is necessary to push the basic understanding of gender beyond a simplistic analysis of different gender tasks, resources and decision-making to look at the dynamic nature of gender relations.

There are three key elements of gender analysis:

- Gender relations are constantly changing. Women and men constantly change their strategies, negotiate and bargain to achieve their co-operative and separate interests.
- Gender relations are part of wider social relations. Women and their activities cannot be considered to take place in a social vacuum.
- The meaning of what men and women do and say changes. This depends on the context within which they are doing and saying it and also on their individual and joint interests and strategies.



Where the interaction is between women and men, this process results in changing gender relations.

The development of a new agricultural technology is a typical example of an intervention designed to improve production and reduce effort on the farm. But such changes inevitably affect how people behave and this contributes to changes in social relations both in and beyond the family. If such change is not anticipated, then predictions about the outcome are not only liable to be inaccurate but there is also a risk that planned livelihood benefits for the most needy will be lost.

A NEW APPROACH

But recognising the importance of analysing changing gender relations is one thing, developing a means of doing it is another. Some strategies, such as bargaining within the household are difficult to identify, and gender relations - indeed all social relations - are subject to local custom and might be specific to particular activities, for instance around livestock management. What is clear is that successful analysis has to be a focussed and detailed empirical examination of a specific context around a particular intervention in a particular situation.

Unfortunately for those who are used to handbooks on experimentation, there is no standard data set that must be collected for monitoring changing gender relations. This new approach avoids the danger of stereotyping by offering sets of generic questions to guide an enquiry. It proposes a method of tailoring these to the local context and to the planned research activity or intervention. This approach has been piloted in Zimbabwe and Tanzania by

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incorporating it into a range of existing programmes, looking at goat production, crop storage, dairy development and rural livelihood enhancement.

In Zimbabwe a research programme had been running for two years looking at grain store construction and the problems of pest control. To introduce the ideas of gender relations, the first task was to assemble background information, both technical and social. This was gleaned from primary information that had already been gathered by project staff and then enhanced through interviews with members of selected households.

The next step was to decide upon units of



analysis by identifying locally significant differences. It was decided that categorising by marriage arrangement type was

the most appropriate and so for case studies, households in the categories of nuclear monogamous, extended monogamous and polygamous were sought. Specific research questions were then drawn up so that local gender relations could be examined as well as changes in those relations related to crop storage and management.

The three principal areas of questioning were:

- What roles do men and women have in grain and store management and mid-season sales?
- What are the strategies within households for grain and store management?
- What bargaining goes on between men and women in the area of stored grain management and sales?

Information was gathered during repeated visits to the selected households. Participants were visited both together and separately, and in the latter case, a male researcher interviewed the husband while a female researcher interviewed the wife. Care was taken to ensure that as full a picture as possible was gained. Establishing a rapport with participants and local knowledge gave clear advantages when gathering sensitive, detailed information.

THE OUTCOME

The impact of a more technically based project might typically be gauged by levels of uptake of an introduced technology or of improvements such as reduced pest damage. With this project, however, such an assessment would not be appropriate. Here, the intended outcomes were realistic research and responsible intervention, which can come about by a better understanding of the processes of social change. This is not to say that these outcomes need be less tangible than reduced infestation of stored grain. One group of beneficiaries was the researchers and practitioners themselves. The approach successfully engaged their interest and enabled them to pursue questions of direct relevance to their work. As one researcher put it "...it gives insights into the factors surrounding technology uptake in communities and may give a better indication

of the uptake pathways for project outputs. This is important if projects are to have a sustainable impact on communities."

In the Tanzanian case, the approach enabled practitioners to address a mismatch in their programme. Originally it was assumed there was a direct relationship between increased dairy production and an improvement in household income and nutrition. But women experienced increased workload and only a limited increase in income and improved nutrition. Even when women were targeted, benefits were still found to be poorly distributed. An analysis of changing gender relations led to a new project objective – 'enabling members of the household dairy enterprise achieve more acceptable benefit distribution themselves'. This led to a change in research focus and subsequent research activities where organised around this new objective.

ACCESS TO THE APPROACH

This approach does not easily lend itself to the provision of a standard checklist of questions, nor a tools-oriented type of handbook. Nor is standardised training appropriate. It is deliberately generic and must remain so for it to work properly. However, a booklet is in preparation which provides guidelines that can be followed but varying degrees of support in applying the approach is likely to be necessary.

R7039 Analysing Changing Gender Relations for Monitoring and Evaluation in the Renewable Natural Resources Sector.

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