

REPORT

Seeds of Change: Report from a Conference on “Gender Equality through Agricultural Research for Development”

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In a small Australian city, two researchers were talking together about research approaches in their shared field of passion - gender-focused agricultural research for development. They dreamt that one day they would see an international conference that brought together the many innovators and scholars in this important field. Two years later this dream was realised at the ‘Seeds of change: Gender equality through agricultural research for development’ conference held at the University of Canberra, April 2-5, 2019.¹ The conference achieved many things, not the least of which was to provide an interactive and intellectually stimulating environment for the 280 participants from 45 countries.

Although gender equality and gender equity are now ‘mainstreamed’, in reality many gender-focused researchers in agriculture are relatively isolated and have few opportunities to challenge and extend their thinking and practice. The conference sought to address this issue and to provide fruitful ground and opportunities for cross-fertilisation. The conference highlighted ways of successfully integrating gender into project design and implementation. It focused on effective ways to catalyse social and behavioural change for both agricultural and social outcomes; gender-sensitive evaluation and impact assessment systems for continuous program improvement; and gender transformative approaches to the adoption of

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¹ The conference was jointly sponsored by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, the CGIAR Collaborative Platform for Gender Research and the University of Canberra. More information can be accessed from the Conference website: <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/aisc/seeds-of-change>

innovative technologies. The conference demonstrated the essential place of interdisciplinarity and the need for new epistemologies that do justice to the complex challenges of the Global South.

Gender integration in agricultural research to-date has tended to focus on the production domain with relatively scant knowledge and systematic learning about the integration of gender within a broader agri-food system perspective. The implications of rapidly transforming agri-food systems and of development investments in gender equality/equity on gender gaps and opportunities, as well as what those mean for food security, health and nutrition, and livelihoods of vulnerable groups were a focus of the conference. Large disparities in nutrition and health outcomes between different social groups, and how these intersect with gender was a further theme. As a result, how social categories such as age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, and religion, create differences in health and nutrition outcomes and processes were made visible.

The relationships among gender, agricultural productivity, and rural transformation was a common theme. Whilst rural transformation may be occurring due to outmigration of particular groups, improved infrastructure, increased access to public services, and new opportunities both in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, gender relations both influence these processes of rural transformation and are changed by them. Here, the conference sought to answer whether women were empowered by taking over new roles when men migrate or are they further burdened by additional responsibilities and through limited access to resources.

This consideration of labour and production relations was further deepened by the challenging questions that must be asked as more men move out of rural areas, and more women must take greater roles in agriculture within various resource constraints. Are they transforming the ways in which production has been carried out conventionally, while transforming themselves? What are the directions of these gendered changes? How are labour and production in farming altering? What factors are driving these changes? Who is benefitting and in what ways? What are the implications of these dynamics?

It is increasingly being recognised that focussing only on women is insufficient to overturn the norms that entrench gender inequality. In the context of agriculture, for example, divisions of labour and the control of income from cash crops have usually privileged men at the expense of women. Changes in rural economies have a profound impact on both men's and women's lives. Increasing reliance on cash crops, the migration of men for work and the thrust for gender rights are impacting across the world on men's roles in rural communities. Whether such changes have caused a

‘crisis of masculinity’ and contributed to pernicious forms of masculinity was examined.

The conference challenged participants to consider several ‘messy’ questions:

(i) What are we measuring when we measure impact? How and why does change happen when it happens? What is missing from the economic empowerment agenda? [Keynote speaker, Naila Kabeer, London School of Economics]

(ii) What works to ensure equitable access to the technologies, services and knowledge generated by agricultural development investments? How do we build the on-ramps for more equitable participation in the new opportunities that emerge with agricultural transformation? [Keynote speaker, Vicki Wilde, Gates Foundation]

(iii) Is there more that unites us than divides us across gender, racial and religious lines? Could it be that current academic structures and intellectual paradigms mitigate against seeking commonality and rather emphasize difference leading to division? [Keynote speaker, Jayne Curnow, ACIAR]