Overview of gender concepts and principles

Gender roles, gender discrimination and gender equality

Text-only version

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- **understand** a number of key gender concepts (gender roles, equality, discrimination, empowerment);
- **identify** the areas where the gender gap in agriculture is more evident;
- **describe** the different dimensions of women’s empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is key to food security and nutrition.

What do gender equality and women’s empowerment mean, and what are the connections between gender equality, food security and nutrition? **How should we approach gender** in our development efforts?

Answering these questions can help us recognize how to design and implement programmes and policies that are **more effective in achieving food security and nutrition**.

In this lesson, we will begin examining the basic concepts related to gender. Then, we will look at examples of gender inequality in agriculture, and become familiar with the concept of women’s empowerment. Finally, we will briefly consider the main approaches that deal with gender in development efforts.

SEX AND GENDER

Let’s start by considering the **difference between sex and gender** looking at the descriptions of two young farmers:

1. Like most women in her village, Afia (female) is involved with farming activities such as growing seedlings in nurseries, transplanting and weeding. She also carries out most of the household duties.
2. Like most men in his village, Akua is typically responsible for land preparation and tillage with oxen. He also sells the crops in the local market.

Can you tell which description is more relevant to “sex” and which one applies to “gender”?

According to the World Health Organization:

- **Sex** refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. (example 1)
- **Gender** refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women (example 2).

At conception we all **start life as equals**, but at birth we are immediately **treated differently**, based on whether we are a boy or a girl. In general, we can say that sex and gender differ because:

- **Sex** is based on **anatomical and biological characteristics** defining males and females.
- **Gender** refers to **socially constructed roles, behaviours and expectations**. Such roles can vary widely across cultures, are dynamic and can change over time.

**Examples of gender features**

- In most countries, women earn significantly less money than men for similar work.
- Men tend to be seen as heads of households, hold more power and have pressure on them to provide for families.
- Often, boys tend to do more physically dangerous work than girls.
- In most of the world, women do more child care and housework than men.

It is important for our work to be aware of sex and gender, because gender roles can change, since they are socially constructed, and our development interventions can support this process of change.
We often forget that gender is not fixed, but is a flexible concept. Gender roles are affected by age, class, race, ethnicity, religion and the geographical, economic and political environment. Changes in gender roles often occur in response to changing economic, natural or political circumstances, including development efforts.

**GENDERED SOCIAL ROLES**

We just considered how gender refers not only to male and female, but to qualities or characteristics that society ascribes to each sex. In fact, all societies organize roles and responsibilities according to gender. Gender roles are those behaviours, tasks and responsibilities that a society considers appropriate for men, women, boys and girls. Gender roles are shaped by ideological, religious, ethnic, economic and cultural factors; they have a tremendous influence on the lives of people, determining the distribution of responsibilities and resources between men and women. Though gender roles can change over time.

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**All the institutions in society are gendered**

Gender shapes everything we do: in fact, all the institutions in society, including family, workplaces, politics, arts, sports, culture, and development institutions are gendered. Gender is everywhere in our daily lives, so much so that we usually take many aspects of gender for granted.

From the time we are young, we learn about the gender expectations of our cultures (including what clothes to wear, what games to play and how we interact with other boys and girls).

As adults, gender defines how we parent, what work we do, what social groups we belong to, who we partner with and how we gain access to resources. We act in ways that we have learned are appropriate to our gender and, in some cases, we actively resist or rebel against these gender norms, which are not set in stone.

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**GENDER ROLES AND DIVISION OF LABOUR**

Gender roles are a primary factor in the division of labour, as often women and men carry out different types of work. Let’s look at a family of farmers: their gender roles and division of labour reflect a situation that is common in many rural areas.

뇌파 She provides labour for planting, weeding, harvesting and threshing crops, and processing produce for sale. This type of work is largely unpaid. She also takes care of small animals. At home, she is responsible for maintaining the household. She raises children, cares for the elderly, grows and prepares food, manages poultry, and collects fuel wood and water.
He usually prepares land, irrigates crops, harvests, transports produce to market and manages income. One of his brothers own and trade cattle, and another is responsible for cutting, hauling and selling timber from forests.

It is important to notice that nowadays gender roles are also affected by the commercialization of agriculture.

**Commercialization of agriculture and changing roles**

With the increasing commercialization of agriculture, gender roles are changing – in men’s favour. For example, as urban demand for vegetables increases, men are taking over women's home gardens to establish commercial enterprises.

The expropriation of women’s activities reduces their production of food for the household, their income and their social standing.

Another growing trend is outmigration of poor rural men in search of employment, which leaves women with sole responsibility for food and cash crop production, as well as the raising of children.

Women and men play multiple roles in society such as productive, household (or reproductive) and community roles.

Men tend to focus on productive (remunerative) and community roles, typically fulfilling their multiple roles in a sequence.

Women, in contrast, often undertake reproductive, productive and community roles simultaneously, balancing the competing claims on their time. Their simultaneous reproductive work and community roles are rarely remunerated with wages, are often time-consuming and are undervalued.

**What does this mean for our work?**

When working on our policies and programmes, it is important to **understand the specific roles** carried out by women and men in the project area.
By doing this, we can avoid mistakes in our interventions, such as introducing activities that impose additional workloads on women, or that may impact negatively on their lives. For example, in a community drinking-water project, there were only male technicians carrying out the feasibility study and planning, designing and implementing water projects. They contacted more men than women to participate in various project activities, and women were not consulted.

As a result, women complained that their water collection time had increased significantly after the improved water services had been installed. In fact, the tap-stands and tubewells had been located along the roadside, where women could not bathe freely for fear of being seen by males. As a result, they were forced to carry water all the way to their homes several times a day, requiring much more of their time and energy.

Gender roles also shape the decision-making power of women and men:

At household level

The different positions of women and men in the households and the gender division of labour often mean they have differing interests. Studies have shown that households rarely have unilateral priorities, and different members have their specific interests related primarily to their work responsibilities, which are often divided by gender. When women control household income, they are more likely to spend money on child health, education and nutrition.

At community level

In many regions of the world, men are the decision-makers at the community level and women are often excluded. When designing development interventions, we have a responsibility to ensure that men and women participate equally in the decision-making process leading to project activities. For example, in India, where village councils reserve seats for women, there has been an increase in investment in infrastructures relevant to women.

At national level

At national and international levels, men often have a prominent role in decision-making and governance in the agricultural sector, with women being excluded. Policies at national level must focus on reducing discrimination against women, especially with regard to land ownership and entitlement. To this end, women should be engaged at senior levels in the various ministries, and together with their male counterparts,
become acquainted with gender-related issues. Moreover, agricultural scientists must also address gender issues in agricultural production and throughout the value chain.

**GENDERED DECISION-MAKING**

Rural women’s decision-making power is an important determinant in improving food security and nutrition. Many studies show that increasing women’s decision-making status in households can lead to improved health, nutrition and education outcomes.

Do you know why?

- When women control additional income, they spend more of it than men do on food, health, clothing and education for their children.
- When women have the power to make decisions about food consumption, they provide better care and nutrition for their families.

More decision-making power for women in the household would have positive implications for immediate well-being, long-run human capital formation and economic growth through improved health, nutrition and education outcomes.

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION**

We have considered the importance of gender roles and their influence on the decision-making power of women and men, and the outcomes for the households.

But what happens when an exclusion or a restriction is made on the basis of gender roles and relations, preventing a person from enjoying his or her rights?

- In this case, we talk about gender discrimination.

Let’s see what are the implications of gender discrimination for rural people and for women, in particular.
Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination is any exclusion or restriction made on the basis of gender roles and relations that prevents a person from enjoying full human rights.

Example: Gandhali’s case

Gandhali is a farmer in a poor rural village.

When her husband died, his family took their land and livestock, leaving her with nothing. Now she works as a labourer in the field, since she needs to take care of her small children, however her wages are lower than men’s, and it’s hard for her to get by.

Gandhali’s story shows two forms of discrimination:

- Land control and ownership, which prevents her from accessing her own land;
- Wage discrimination, which gives higher status to men than to women for the same type of activities.

In fact, in many countries men’s work is more highly valued than women’s, even if what they do is very similar. These different forms of discrimination also affect women’s access to rights, opportunities, resources, assets and services.

Discrimination based on gender can also manifest itself in violence, especially during emergencies when women are isolated and more vulnerable.

Gender-based violence

This type of violence occurs across all societies, classes, racial and ethnic groups. It takes many forms, including physical, sexual, emotional and psychological violence. The most common form is physical or sexual abuse by partners and non-partners which intensifies in conflict situations. Rape is a conscious tactic of war that is used to terrorize and humiliate enemies in almost all armed conflicts. Violence is exacerbated by poverty and limited access to food and other productive resources and services.

Women are also subject to violence through traditional practices. In some Middle Eastern countries and Africa, girls are subjected to genital cutting, which can impact their health throughout their lifetime. In some regions of South Asia, women are subject to dowry murders when their families cannot meet the demands for dowry payments by the husband or in-laws.

In many parts of the world, lesbian, gay and transgendered people are also subject to violence due to their sexual orientation.

Gender-based violence takes huge tolls on women’s and girls’ physical and psychological health, causing long-term harm to them, their families and society as a whole.
GENDER DISCRIMINATION: THE GENDER GAP IN AGRICULTURE

Gender discrimination imposes costs not only on women themselves, but on the agriculture sector, the broader economy and society as a whole. In fact, rural women suffer systematic discrimination in their access to the resources and services needed for socio-economic development. This gender gap can be seen in:

1. **Education**
2. **Financial services**
3. **Extension and technologies**
4. **Land and water**
5. **Livestock**
6. **Employment**
7. **Water**

**Education**

In almost all countries, women have less education than men, although the situation is now slowly improving.

In most developing countries, data suggest that members of female-headed households in rural areas have less education than those in male-headed households.

In many cases, it is girls who drop out of school to help the family.

Moreover, the number of women working in science and technology research remains low in most developing countries.

**Financial services**

Smallholders face constraints in accessing credit and other financial services. In most countries, the number of smallholders who can access credit is 5 to 10 percent lower for female than for male smallholders.

Improving women’s direct access to financial resources leads to higher investments in human capital in the form of children’s health, nutrition and education.

Also, microcredit loans, when granted to women and women’s groups, lead to their empowerment by positively influencing their decision-making power and enhancing their overall socio-economic status.
An example of what we can do through our interventions

**Microfinance** programs have often made savings and credit available to poor women. However, it is also important to offer financial literacy training to ensure that women can compare products and make decisions based on a clear understanding of the products available and the cost implications.

We can also provide support by **strengthening local organizations** so that rural women and men can have increased access to credit.

Extension and technologies

The provision of extension services (the application of scientific research and new knowledge to agricultural practices through farmer education) remains low for both women and men, with more male than female extension agents. Furthermore, women access these services **less often than men**. Women also have less access to inputs such as fertilizers and improved seeds, and to mechanical tools and equipment. In many countries, women are only half as likely as men to use fertilizers. Gender gaps exist for a wide range of agricultural technologies, including machines and tools, improved plant varieties and animal breeds, fertilizers, pest control measures and management techniques.

An example of what we can do through our interventions

Introducing equipment ergonomically designed for women can reduce strain and make their labour more productive.

Nevertheless, many agricultural research and development programmes focus on the period from planting to harvest and neglect postharvest processing, which is more likely to be women’s domain. By introducing improvements in processing, we can potentially reduce women’s labour burden, while decreasing food losses, increasing incomes and improving nutritional content.

Land

In developing countries for which data are available, **only 10 to 20 percent of all landholders are women**. Among smallholders, in most countries, farms operated by female-headed households are smaller, their land is often of poorer quality and comes in smaller plots.

In some countries and regions, **women cannot own or lease land**, as custom and societal pressures stop them from acquiring these rights, or force them to give up those rights to male relatives.

Often, **unmarried women cannot acquire land**, although the same rules do not apply to unmarried men.
Livestock

It is estimated that two-thirds of poor livestock keepers, totaling approximately 400 million people, are women. However, women are much less likely to own large animals, such as cattle and oxen, and they are usually responsible for poultry and small ruminants, such as goats.

Employment

In most developing countries, agriculture is the most important source of employment for women in rural areas. Many women work as paid agricultural labour as well as on their own family farms. But women are more likely than men to hold low-wage, part-time, seasonal employment. They also tend to be paid less even when their qualifications are higher than men’s.

Water

Reliable access to clean water is especially important to women, who are often responsible for obtaining water for domestic use and for plants and animals under their care.
Surveys from 45 developing countries show that **women and children bear the primary responsibility** for water collection in the vast majority of households (76 percent). Water collection is time taken away from working at an income-generating job, caring for family members or attending school.

Further examples of the gender gap in agriculture are:

- A discriminatory family law that prevents the wife from inheriting her husband’s land.
- Discrimination in national laws and public institutions, in terms of access to a number of services for certain ethnic minorities.

Although it is important to remember that gender is **only one among many social statuses**, with many societies discriminating against people on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, caste, age and religion. These statuses often intersect with gender. For example, the impossibility to access credit because of lack of land rights can happen to both men and women; however, women are denied access to land more often than men.

**GENDER EQUALITY**

What can we do to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and close the gender gap in agriculture?

We can **make sure** that policies and **programmes are gender-aware**, and promote equal access to resources and services. In other words, we can ensure that they work towards achieving **gender equality**.

**Gender equality** implies equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for men, women, boys and girls.

**What’s the difference between gender equality and gender equity?**

**Gender equality** is the **state** in which women and men enjoy equal rights, opportunities and entitlements in civil and political life. It means equal participation of women and men in decision-making, equal ability to exercise their human rights, equal access to and control over resources and the benefits of development, and equal opportunities in employment and in all other aspects of their livelihoods.

**Gender equity** is a **way to achieve** gender equality. It means fairness and impartiality in the treatment of women and men in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.

By creating social relations in which neither of the sexes suffers discrimination, **gender**
Gender equality aims at improving gender relations and gender roles, and, ultimately, achieving gender equality.

Gender equality does not mean that men and women that men and women are the same. In fact, it is not achieved through identical treatment: treatment may be equal or different, but should always be considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.

Gender equality means that men and women are equally valued and not discriminated against. The treatment should be impartial and relevant to their respective needs. In fact, gender equality is not a ‘women's issue' but refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, girls and boys, and should concern and fully engage men as well as women.

GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, which can be pursued in different contexts or dimensions (e.g. economic, socio-cultural, family, legal, political and psychological). Each of these dimensions spans:

① the household,
② the community and
③ the broader areas

By empowerment of women it we mean the process of gaining access and developing women’s capacities with a view to participating actively in shaping one’s own life and that of one’s community in economic, social and political terms.

Here are three real-life examples related to economic empowerment:

① A capacity-development programme

This project in sub-Saharan Africa included activities to train women and men in entrepreneurial skills, so that they could sell their surplus produce in the market. At the same time, families participated in gender-sensitive programmes, to learn how to share the workloads and use the family income.
To achieve gender equality, it is important that women’s empowerment occurs at all levels, from the household, to the community, to the national level and in global organizations.

At household level:

- We try to enhance girls’ and women’s education, while sensitizing men. This enables them to reach equality in decision-making at home, and gain the knowledge to provide food security in the household.
  
  We also respect women’s multiple roles as producers and caregivers, to enable their full participation in our activities.

At community level:

② A new information system

These women farmers in rural Gujarat, India, lacked access to market information and disposable cash to pay for the transport of their products to local or nearby markets. They tended to sell their goods to local traders at whatever price the traders dictated. As a result, they received low returns for their produce, while the traders captured significant profits.

In response, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a non-governmental organization of poor, self-employed women workers across India, many of whom are rural women farmers, set up a simple market price information system – based on mobile phones - to help rural women get better and fairer prices for their goods.

With this information women farmers in the villages are able to sell their produce at higher – and fairer – market prices.

③ A country-wide initiative

In Afghanistan, a FAO project helped to organize more than 20,000 rural women in poultry producers’ groups across the country. The project provided them with training, improved pullets and equipment, plus access to urban markets.

Their poultry enterprises now produce 30 million eggs per year, which led to an improvement in their potential to earn income.
We use various strategies for empowering women, including leadership training to increase their negotiating power, creating small women’s groups within organizations and developing quotas for women’s participation.

At national level

We were able to promote small changes in legislation such as allowing two names on land registration forms, which can be a potent strategy for encouraging joint ownership of land for men and women.

GENDER APPROACHES

Achieving gender equality is key to food security and nutrition.

What are the existing strategies and approaches that deal with gender in development efforts?

Let’s start by considering two main ways of incorporating gender perspectives:

- Gender mainstreaming
  - incorporates a gender perspective into all policies, strategies, programmes and project activities, as well as into the institutional culture, frameworks and accountability mechanisms of organizations.

- Gender integration
  - refers to efforts to include gender considerations in all phases of the project cycle (e.g. assessment, design, implementation and evaluation).

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s and men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.

(UN Economic and Social Council).
GENDER APPROACHES: GENDER MAINSTREAMING

There have been successful efforts to mainstream gender in agriculture and food security programmes, in support of different types of organizations (non-governmental, governmental and international organizations), policies and practices, that include:

- **full commitment** of senior management;
- **agency-wide understanding** of gender issues and concerns;
- **application of gender analysis** in policies, programmes and projects;
- moving beyond token gestures such as **counting** number of men and women;
- **access to information**, resources and training on gender issues;
- **availability of sex-disaggregated data** and gender-specific indicators;
- **awareness-raising** on gender issues;
- **gender-responsive budgeting**.

GENDER APPROACHES: FROM EXPLOITATIVE TO TRANSFORMATIVE

The Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG) has identified a continuum of gendered approaches, which go from those that are “gender blind”, to those that **exploit** gender inequalities, to those that **accommodate** gender differences and those that seek to **transform** rigid gender roles in order to achieve gender equality.

The IGWG

IGWG, established in 1997, is a network comprising non-governmental organizations, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), cooperating agencies and the Bureau for Global Health of USAID.

The IASC sub-working group on gender in humanitarian action is recommending different approaches to address the gender dimensions in emergency and rehabilitation interventions. It is proposing some gender markers to monitor how programmes and projects are promoting and tracking gender-related impacts.

1. **Gender blind**:  
   This approach refers to policies and programmes that do not consider gender roles or power relationships. They do not address how gender issues might impact the achievement of project objectives. For example, those projects that focus on narrower technical issues, such as increasing productivity, improving crop varieties, or improving animal health and reproductive outcomes.
2. **Gender aware:**
   A gender aware approach deliberately addresses gender-related issues and outcomes during project design and implementation.

3. **Gender exploitative:**
   These approaches take advantage of gender norms and uneven power issues in order to achieve broader project objectives. These types of approaches can result in a step backward for gender equality. A clear example would involve targeting women as low wage earners and part-time workers in agricultural production, given the awareness that women’s wages are lower than men’s and that they have family obligations. Some of the efforts of developing global agricultural trade and new value chains have relied heavily on low-wage and women workers in agricultural processing. For example, a large contract-farming project in China involves thousands of farmers. Men sign the contracts, while women provide the bulk of the labour. In such schemes, women are often not compensated well for their unpaid family labour.

4. **Gender accommodating:**
   A gender accommodating approach recognizes differences in gender roles and gender inequities, but does not seek to change these power structures or unequal dynamics. This approach may be an appropriate first step in situations where rigid gender roles and highly unequal relations exist between men and women.

5. **Gender transformative:**
   These interventions encourage awareness of gender roles, improving the position of women, challenging the imbalance of power between men and women, and addressing power differences between women and service providers. Gender transformative approaches seek to challenge rigid gender roles and relations. These approaches often go beyond the individual level to focus on interpersonal, social, structural and institutional practices that address gender inequalities.

Here are three different examples of gender approaches:

- **Exploitative**
  - A contract-farming project in China that hires a large number of women, since they belong to the category of low-wage workers.
Gender in Food and Nutrition Security

- **Accomodating**
  - A nutritional programme where women are targeted because they are the primary caregivers for infants and children.

- **Transformative**
  - An approach that focuses on providing stable land ownership and use rights to women in households and communities.

**Which approach should we prefer?**

- Gender **transformative approaches** are the long-term goal, but in some cases, a gender accommodating approach may be more practical in terms of programme development.

**Example**

Gender accommodating approaches are often used in nutrition programmes, where women are targeted as the primary caregivers for infants and children. However, a longer term gender transformative strategy might develop programmes that are designed to educate both men and women about nutrition, and the impact of uneven gender power dynamics on food security.

This strategy would go a step further and transform power dynamics and gender roles in the household.

Another example of a gender transformative approach: a child survival project in Latin America that heavily involved men and boys to become better partners and fathers and to take responsibility for making better sexual and reproductive health decisions.

**CONCLUSIONS**

We considered how the level of women’s empowerment lies at the heart of their effectiveness, and is critical to food security and nutritional outcomes.
In the next lessons, we will consider how to translate the commitment to gender-transformative agriculture into more systematic policy actions, and how to integrate gender in agricultural strategies and programmes. By empowering women and reducing the gender gap, households, communities and society as a whole will benefit.

SUMMARY

- Gender roles are those behaviours, tasks and responsibilities that a society considers appropriate for men, women, boys and girls. They vary widely across cultures, are dynamic and can change over time.

- Gender roles are a primary factor in the division of labour, where often women and men carry out different types of work. Gender roles also shape the decision-making power of women and men: men have more power than women and are the main decision-makers at household, community and national levels, while women are often left out of these decision-making processes.

- When an exclusion is made on the basis of gender, preventing a person from enjoying his or her rights, we talk about gender discrimination. This discrimination happens in agriculture, where women experience a “gender gap”. To close it, we must make sure that policies and programmes are gender-aware, and work towards achieving gender equality.

- Gender equality implies equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for men, women, boys and girls. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, which can be pursued in different contexts or dimensions (e.g. economic, socio-cultural, family, legal, political and psychological).