7 Embodied engagement with gender and agrobiodiversity

Leveraging transformative moments in multidisciplinary teams

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In conversation with Marlène Elias*

Introduction

What happens when a leading international research centre that provides technical knowledge on agricultural and forest biodiversity to strengthen food security and ecosystem health is required to bring a gender perspective into its work? As part of a strategic initiative, Gender Specialist Marlène Elias was hired to take on this mantle in Bioversity International, one of the 15 CGIAR research centres (formerly the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research). Bioversity International (hereafter, BI) was initially established as the International Board for Plant Genetic Resources and subsequently operated under the name of International Plant Genetic Resources Institute. Its early work focused on the emergency conservation of crop genetic resources in gene banks. The organisation's focus has changed over time, and at the time of our discussion with Marlène, BI's mission was to deliver scientific evidence, management practices and policy options to use and safeguard agricultural and forest biodiversity to attain sustainable global food and nutrition security. Since 2020, BI is in a formal alliance with CIAT (the Center for Tropical Agriculture), another CGIAR centre. The alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT aims to 'deliver research-based solutions that harness agricultural biodiversity and sustainably transform food systems to improve people's lives'. Bioversity International is one of the CGIAR centres contributing to the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA), which is the world's largest research for development program to enhance the role of forests, trees and agroforestry in sustainable development and food security, and to address climate change. Within her remit as Gender Specialist in the realm of Conservation and Management of Forest Genetic Resources, Marlène's work has involved implementing FTA's cross-centre Gender Strategy, launched in 2013, and more generally, integrating gender into BI's activities.

Gender research has been a part of the CGIAR's work for many years, as a substantial grey literature testifies (van der Burg, 2019). However, the relatively

recent appointment of gender specialists (including Marlène) has been part of a more centralised, rigorous and measurable integration of gender issues within CGIAR around the time it launched its CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs), including FTA, in 2011. Each CRP was required to develop a Gender Strategy and provide adequate resources towards its implementation to develop gender disaggregated research, form partnerships and alliances with external gender experts at various levels, and increase knowledge sharing and learning across and beyond the network of CGIAR research centres (CIFOR, 2013; FTA, 2020). The reach and effects of this recent effort to mainstream gender in agricultural and forest research for development has attracted interest both within and outside the CGIAR (Arora-Jonsson, 2014; Arora-Jonsson & Sijapati Basnett 2018; Mukhopadhyay & Prügl 2019; van der Burg 2019). These discussions have provided a useful reflection on the underlying norms that shape what counts as knowledge in environmental organisations such as those making up the CGIAR, and on the artefacts – the tools and texts – that emerge as ‘gender’ is brought into agriculture and forestry research for development.

In this chapter, we bring another strand into the debates represented in this emerging literature, and offer a three-way discussion that reflects on the embodied, everyday and practical challenges of working as a gender specialist in an environmental research for development organisation, and the small pathways that offer the potential to realise commitments to transformative change. Our discussions are framed through feminist political ecology and the politics of situated knowledges, and with recent discussions around pedagogy that have been taking place in parallel feminist development studies contexts (Oberhauser, 2019; Harcourt, 2019). Part of the discussion in this chapter explores how the tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994), and in particular, experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), resonate within the challenges of bringing gender expertise into multi-disciplinary teams in largely biophysical research-for-development settings.

The chapter is organised around three related thematic areas that emerged initially from Marlène’s reflections on her work, and that we explored in more detail in our subsequent discussions: (i) how pathways for embedding gender knowledge are enabled (or closed down) by the specific institutional context into which they are introduced; (ii) embodied and field-based experiential approaches for incorporating gender expertise into multi-disciplinary teams in technical settings; and (iii) the challenges of enacting such approaches at scale within the logics of technocratic project requirements. As our discussions show, the kinds of transformations required meant going beyond calls to develop a common scientific language with a mainstreamed technical application of gender expertise, and instead taking seriously other ways of working with gender in ‘agriculture for development’ (A4D) that develop knowledge collaboratively in ways that are meaningful for scientists, as well as for people and their communities. We begin below with a discussion of how the institutional context at BI has been important in shaping how ‘gender knowledge’ enters and is engaged with, within an applied science team.

Bringing gender to Bioversity International

A question we raise in the introduction to this book is whether the epistemological interface between gender knowledge and environmental science raises particular questions and issues for the ‘gender expert’ and the potential for meaningful (feminist) change as gender work involves engagement in techno-scientific and managerialist fields with logics at odds with the feminist social science on which much gender expertise is based. At Bioversity International, that epistemological interface has taken a particular form, shaped largely by the organisation’s history and approach, and its relationship with other centres within the CGIAR.

Marlène suggests that the systems approach taken by BI to the understanding of environmental management and agriculture has offered relatively fertile ground for considering people, and with that, gender questions.

Marlène: Bioversity looks at biodiversity in farming systems and the ways that cultivated and uncultivated species come together to make up the agro-ecosystem. We are tasked with protecting biodiversity but with a view to it being used by people: managing biodiversity for its use in improving lives and healthy ecosystems, taking a systems approach. With this approach, it is easier to see where people fit in, to put people into the picture.

A holistic approach that eschews separating people from nature conceptually and in practical action has provided an institutional context in which it has been possible to open up conversations about gender equality, as many scientists within BI were already engaged in farming systems, farmer-first and participatory research approaches, some having been instrumental in this shift (Conway 1985; Chambers et al. 1989; Friis-Hansen and Sthapit 2000; see also Chapter 2). Early on, such approaches had attempted to foster new types of partnerships between farmers and technical and social scientists, and in so doing, move some way towards a more nuanced approach to what knowledge is, or which knowledge should be considered more real or valuable.

Marlène: There has been quite a bit of farming systems and participatory research originating from scientists within Bioversity International. I’m lucky to be sitting here – my colleagues are open minded and many are already experienced with working with people. I was hired to bring a gender perspective into the forestry team. I soon realised this meant bringing in a social scientific perspective and humans into forests – it was a much broader mission than ‘gender’. Within that, of course, a focus on gender relations.

Marlène’s arrival at Bioversity International coincided with – and was enabled by – the creation of CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs) that cut across different CGIAR centres. These were established to bring together complementary skills and knowledge that could be applied for resolving ‘wicked’ problems around healthy ecosystems, food security, climate change, and more, for which

a systemic approach was required across the research centres internationally. Within this, Bioversity International joined a CRP focusing on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA), led by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR, see Chapter 9) and involving World Agroforestry (ICRAF, now merged with CIFOR) and CIAT. Bioversity's involvement in FTA emerges as a second factor that Marlène cites as having made a difference in how bringing gender knowledge into a largely biophysical and technical setting has played out.

Marlène: The first round of these research programs was initiated to collaborate across CGIAR centres as a lot of work was being done in parallel while there were complementarities that could be brought together. At the same time, there was a push to integrate gender across these research programs, which were funded by the CGIAR Trust Fund [i.e. from donor countries, including the UK and USA]. Several donors were pushing for greater gender integration in the CRPs; the large research programs which encompassed most of the work the CGIAR was doing.

In FTA the director was very receptive, and FTA was one of the more proactive research programs in terms of putting money aside for developing and implementing a gender strategy. There is also a particularly strong social science capacity within CIFOR [Center for International Forestry Research], the lead center of FTA.

Working with other gender experts within FTA has enabled something akin to a transnational community of practice to emerge (Wenger, 1999). Marlène's efforts to embed gender within research projects at Bioversity International were also supported by collaborations with gender scientists performing similar work in other CRPs and CGIAR centers. Describing this process from the vantage point of CIFOR, the lead partner in FTA, Arora-Jonsson and Sijapati Basnett (2018) characterise the CGIAR gender network as representing multiple 'agents of change' including donors, top management, researchers, gender experts (such as Marlène) and hard incentives. Taken together, these have simultaneously diffused gender theories, approaches and training and enhanced the institutional spaces in which these could be fruitfully implemented within research projects, although as Marlène notes, there is still plenty of work to do.

In their foreword to a recent collection on the politics of feminist knowledge transfer and gender training (Bustelo et al., 2016), Marx Fereë and Verloo argue that more effective change strategies are likely where there is better awareness of how knowledge is situationally conditioned (2016: xi). In the case of Bioversity International, the situational conditioning of gender equity work has come about through the entry point that earlier work in farming systems and participatory research offered, as this had already brought aspects of participatory research into technical fields and an acceptance of a more pluralistic approach to knowledge (including that of communities in which BI research teams were working). It has also been shaped by the wider institutional support that came about through a convergence of donor requirements and the right alignment of expertise that was able

to influence research agendas (i.e. senior scientists at CIFOR in particular with expertise in social science and on gender). However, whilst donor checklists and tools may have made the initial push at BI, Marlène stresses that they cannot, by themselves, transform. As the next section explores, an implicit understanding of her institutional context and her efforts in working alongside her technical science colleagues has underpinned Marlène's approach to bringing gender expertise (and with this, the goal of gender equity) into the multidisciplinary research teams that are responsible for delivering Bioversity International's mission.

Decentred authority in bringing gender expertise to multidisciplinary teams

As the first person to be hired at Bioversity International with gender in her terms of reference, Marlène's appointment was very much oriented towards the support function of gender mainstreaming, and her remit involved supporting work on the conservation and management of forest genetic resources across various research projects so that this work could be gender-responsive. Key to this has been the requirement to work in multidisciplinary teams, and indeed having the fluency in the languages and epistemologies of other disciplines (forest management science, for example) is one of the qualities that earned Marlène her post at BI. Central to her work is engagement with those who are close to the field, involved in projects around forest conservation and management, including forest-based livelihoods and market integration. Initially, locating where gender might fit within the scheme of research projects involved identifying entry points within existing technical research projects to make them more gender responsive.

Marlène: Part of my terms of reference was to keep up to date with gender theories and approaches and translate those into resource materials and training possibilities. We have done this in different ways. When I began, we tried to get people talking about gender, with a number of workshops where we developed some of these basic 'what is gender' activities; in other words, participatory interactive thinking around what gender was, trying to understand and meet people where they were at that point, as researchers with limited exposure to what gender was or how it fitted in their work. We also developed a number of tools, such as on strategies for doing gender responsive data collection or communicating findings in gender responsive ways, and briefs on how gender relates to different aspects of research.

One of the approaches that Marlène has adopted was based on mentoring through funded fellowships, where researchers in five countries where BI works were recruited to work on gender equity within existing project teams and supported pedagogically.

Marlène: Probably the most effective has been a fellowship program where we had five professionals from different disciplines in different countries join

project teams. Three were young and two were older researchers who had not worked on gender before. They received mentorship, used participatory methods in the field and tried to influence their project teams, and learned together through social learning as they moved through the program. I don't know how much they influenced the larger projects in which they were embedded, but they did generate research products that helped to put gender on the map at BI. It made other researchers feel like something was happening and enabled them to see more connections about how gender relates to the work they were doing.

The approach Marlène describes in the work she has done to bring gender knowledge into BI – social learning, enabling people to see connections – carries echoes of Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), which had underpinned much of the early epistemological shift in the 1980s to participatory modes of development training and practice that aspired to be reflexive, inclusive and non-hierarchical (Chambers, 1993, see also Prüggl, 2016). In contrast to a 'banking' model of knowledge transfer, the emphasis is on learning as a process that is embodied, reflexive and experiential. In our discussions, Marlène's reflections illustrate the ways in which she has implicitly decentred her authority as a 'gender expert' in her approach to building gender work within BI. The moments she identifies as successful are where she has avoided being heavily didactic within multi-disciplinary research teams and instead encouraged an experiential and affective mode of learning based on discovery. As she notes, this began early in her work at BI.

Marlène: One of my colleagues who had been on my interview panel said that 'part of what made us select you was firstly that you had a forestry background, that you could speak our language, but secondly that we found you had a softer approach as to how you wanted to bring us somewhere, accompany us in our thinking on how to bring gender in'. That was very interesting to me. I didn't do that deliberately, but that has very much been how I've tried to work. It has been a privilege to work with a small team; it has been a conversation, a dialogue. You are not going to take the conversation in the same way with different people. The interpersonal approach is very much to the point. What resonates with one colleague is not the same as with another. It is not about trying to convince people. In Québec, we say: '*L'essayer c'est l'adopter*', which means that if you try something good, it will speak for itself – and you'll want to do it again, to adopt it (take it up). I feel excited about something others can discover in their ways and in their own time. What validates us as professionals? Those moments when I feel someone is seeing something in a new way than before. I remember the first time I read Edward Said's *Orientalism* [Said 1978]. From one moment to the next, my world changed. I remember very vividly thinking that before, I was blind; now my world has got a little bigger from reading this.

In outlining her own learning process and personal development, what emerges in Marlène's reflections is a sense that she has implicitly adopted a mode of working aligned with approaches being explored in recent feminist discussions that bring an explicitly intersectional feminist pedagogy into gender training in development in which the gender expert – effectively the pedagogue in this context – decentres their authority and learns with those in their team (Harcourt, 2019; Ferguson, 2019; see also hooks 1994). Such discussions argue that rather than persuading, gender training should emphasise process rather than outcomes (Mukhopadhyay & Wong, 2007; Davids & van Eerdewijk, 2016), should point to the need to validate the personal experience of learners (Prügl, 2016; Harcourt, 2019) and encourage a commitment to social justice, critical thinking and open-mindedness (Ferguson, 2019). This contrasts with the more commonly practised top-down approach to gender training, where the emphasis is on 'frameworks and checklists that can be easily applied' and the simplification of 'complex theories and context-specific analysis into easy and digestible terms' (Davids & van Eerdewijk, 2016: 87). Technocratic aspects of gender mainstreaming do form part of Marlène's work: 'Some might be checklists that offer an approach and guidance for working but are not necessarily inspiring'. However, she notes that: 'For any real change, there must be a long-term process, for people to change and see how things come together. A lot of that is experiential, you have to play around with it, you have to feel it, you have to get in there.'

We asked how, in the process of interactions and dialogues within her teams, Marlène deals with differences in terms of peoples' backgrounds, positionality (in terms of gender, race, cultural difference) and, given the premise with which we opened our discussions, difference in terms of biophysical and technical academic backgrounds. Marlène has noted that knowledge hierarchies between technical scientific and social science knowledges within BI were perhaps less entrenched than in other environmental research-for-development contexts. But how does this more pedagogic approach play out within BI, which is comprised of a range of expert knowledges and technical-scientific professional identities? Marlène's reflections suggest this requires more than validating the *personal* experience of others (Prügl, 2016; Harcourt, 2019). A multi-disciplinary context linking biophysical and social science also means 'engaging with others whose "truth commitments" are structured around different premises' (Marx Feree & Verloo, 2016: x). This involves working with colleagues' existing knowledge base and experiences, recognising the value of this knowledge and then building upon this to help them learn (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994).

In contexts where it is sometimes difficult for social science, feminist and qualitative forms of knowledge to be heard, this also means encouraging an environment in which people are respectful of each other's knowledge and expertise, and recognising where it is more appropriate to source the right skills for the right projects, rather than undertake gender training that leads people to feel they are gender experts but without the depth of study or engagement that is required for this to be successful. The 'softer ground' for this kind of approach that was described in the earlier section, might be one factor that allows for a flourishing of

multi-disciplinary work and the valuing of gender expertise without the obstacles that accompany unhelpful knowledge hierarchies.

Marlène: You want people to be able to do gender-responsive work. For example, I encourage people to think about who they are asking and what they are asking [in relation to collecting social data]; to think more deeply. But doing *gender research*, trying to understand gender norms, power relations, structural inequalities: those are issues that I don't think everyone can quickly become well versed in. Just in the way you would look for an agronomist if looking at soil, you need some expertise for studying gender – the right kind of expertise for what you want to know. I have made a point of making that analogy when speaking to non-gender scientists about gender research, of turning the tables and acknowledging that I lack expertise in their area and that I recognise the value of their expertise, and letting them come to similar conclusions on the other side. I don't feel qualified to do the genetic work or the soil work, but the other way around doesn't make much sense either.

From a practical point of view, does this mean that it is more effective if gender specialists train other social scientists, rather than having a geneticist or other technical scientist do gender analytical work? Is this more about juxtaposing and valuing different peoples' knowledge and expertise?

Marlène: I feel very strongly about that. We don't need to bring the breeders to the same point or place as the people working in the field [with communities] or with social data. That is not the breeders' job but it is important for them to see how it all fits together and to have that in mind when thinking about what they are doing, who for, and why it matters. It does our profession good too. I worked many years to get here – there was a whole process of learning and preparing for this work. We can't expect others to get there without a significant personal commitment or journey. Capacities for doing gender analyses need to start before we even look at gender, in how we understand knowledge production, in the basis of the social sciences...it is about how we know the world. That's also what I mean about being able to converse and have some fluency in thinking across the biophysical science–social science divide – if people don't recognise that knowledge is situated, if they don't question the notions of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', then little about the social world makes sense. Ideas about gender and social relations will be floating, not grounded. The conversation needs to start much earlier; the foundation [for thinking in this way] is much deeper.

Let's get the right people [for doing gender research], and the rest to see the big picture, be gender-responsive, and see the value and necessity in collaborating.

What would enable Marlène's team to get to the point of fluency whereby they can recognise the situatedness of their perspectives, and begin to move forward

through dialogue across disciplines? For this Marlène turns to experiential learning in a field context.

Marlène: For me, everything is consolidated in the field, when you start to see things around you. If you have new ideas as a result of a dialogue or reading, take them to the field, and start to observe in a different way. After that, when people come back from the field, they say: I hadn't noticed that before – how long that woman had to walk to collect water or fuelwood... It is about bringing an awareness of gender issues into the context where you work and how this maps out there, in a field setting.

Bringing together and connecting peoples' own experiences and academic understandings, whilst engaging with a field context is an approach that is closely associated with field-based critical pedagogy being practiced in universities either through global experiential education programs (as described by Oberhauser, 2019) or in what Cravey and Petit (2012) refer to as learning through the body and through place in the field, which, advocates suggest, provide opportunities for transformative understanding.

Within the context of BI's project teams, learning through a field context not only enables people to validate their existing knowledge and expertise, but, by bringing issues into view through places and communities, it is also an opportunity to acknowledge the circumstances of privilege that Ferguson suggests makes Freire's (2000) 'pedagogy of the oppressed' difficult when using it amongst relatively privileged researchers and practitioners (Ferguson, 2019). Where gender training is based on people reflecting on individualised personal experience (i.e. through emotional bodies), this can further entrench and normalise masculine, white or colonial privilege unless these are directly confronted (Cornwall, 2016). A fieldwork context provides a more relational context that includes other axes of experiential knowledge through which people can reflect.

Marlène: I remember when I was in university studying for months in the field, in rural settings in Kenya, with some colleagues. Every night we talked a lot, we couldn't sleep. Our heads were filled with so many ideas and questions. The field is an ideal situation. If your project team is in the field, get them talking, discussing over meals, observing, seeing things in new ways. So much is informal, that is when things start to come to life, when you see things. When you have an emotion associated with a piece of information, you learn it.

Whereas her team is quite small, which is a manageable sphere of influence, an issue that Marlène is acutely aware of is that donors want to see an upscaling of change, and as she puts it, 'we still have to look for ways to influence small but radiate big outwards'. It is to those thorny questions of the logics of knowledge generation at scale and with donor agendas in mind that the final section of this chapter now turns.

Working with the logics of technocratic research and impact evaluation

When Marlène first arrived at Bioversity International, much of her effort was directed towards making existing projects, which were largely technical, more gender-responsive. As time has gone on, this has begun to shift, as she has been more involved in project development from the outset. However, she points to the logics of project development and evaluation of impact that work against the more transformative forms of learning to ‘do gender’ in ways that are meaningful for research teams and the communities in which they work. Three issues emerged in our discussion that are pertinent to the logics of research practice at BI. These resonate with other similar organisations working internationally and within the context of a development industry that is managed through technocratic instruments such as log frames and quantitative forms of impact evaluation, as other chapters in this book suggest. These work as structural disincentives for leveraging the kinds of transformative learning in research practice that we reflected on in the preceding section.

First, Marlène notes that as a gender specialist, the requirement to work internationally and with teams in many different countries in BI makes it difficult to deepen engagement in specific projects with particular geographies, or even to be able to build synergies across different research initiatives that might broaden and deepen understanding in and of a given place. While she stresses that being able to work in different parts of the world is a privilege and that it offers scope for building a more comparative perspective, she compares this universalising mode of working with the deep knowledge and understanding that she was able to develop through her doctoral research.

Marlène: My reality is very different [from her days doing her doctoral research]. I’m in many different countries, I’m in different teams working on different thematics. If you work in four regions, your ability to master a literature that is geographically located is impossible, you can’t do it justice. You have to collaborate with other people in your field who are very knowledgeable about a specific place. In that situation, we can each bring different contributions. It is not necessarily interdisciplinarity, but it is a different kind of productive dialogue with people who are coming from different geographical experiences.

Such an approach would be a small step towards challenging the building of professional gender expertise on a universalised gender knowledge, assumed to be readily transferable and applicable across contexts (Kunz et al., 2019; Narayanaswamy, 2016).

Secondly, Marlène notes the ways in which technical priorities can dominate problem definition and research design, even as there is an awareness of how this might be at odds with responsive applied research.

Marlène: In the teams I work with, I think there’s a respect and appreciation, at least in the team set-up, for having a better balance of social science and

biophysical science inputs, and directing the research questions from these different perspectives. A CGIAR gender colleague suggested that it should be the social scientists driving the proposals...because the problems to be defined are by nature social science problems. The kinds of challenges we are dealing with are about poverty alleviation, food security and improved management of natural resources. Often what happens is not only a technocratic retrofitting of gender analysis into a technical field, but also people coming in to a proposal with what they know, what they do, building a work package and then trying to build a narrative around how it will help solve a problem – so, trying to make their ‘solution’ relevant to a problem, rather than starting from the problem and figuring out whether or how their work is relevant to it.

Seemingly, the transformative learning ‘moments’ that Marlène described in the previous section are difficult to leverage within prevailing technical project management requirements, whether at BI or in other environment and development organisations (Li, 2007; Mosse, 2011), and in particular where epistemic authority is more readily tied to science and quantitative social science disciplines (Kunz et al., 2019). Yet knowledge hierarchies amongst individual team members from biophysical and social science disciplinary backgrounds are not the only obstacles to address.

Marlène: The framework within which we develop projects, for example, the requirements of donors, the use of log frames, the requirement for measurable indicators: it is a particular logic that suits very well certain types of knowledge generation fields and disciplines over others. So it is not only about who gets to define a research problem, but the frameworks within which we are operating. It is also the time frame within which some of those impacts have to be delivered that does not favour certain kinds of research.

The dangers gender experts face in establishing their authority by working through governing technologies that ‘reflect the episteme of the biophysical and natural sciences’ (Mukhopadhyay & Prügl, 2019: 10) is that these close down opportunities for less linear and predictive research designs and privileges certain methodologies (e.g. surveys and quantitative research) over ethnographic or other qualitative approaches deemed overly ‘subjective’. The latter require sustained engagement with people in places, that may generate the most meaningful gender analysis, and through this, opportunities for transformative change.

Thirdly, the time frames under which research and its impact are ‘measured’ within project logics work against a more transformative agenda in gender-responsive or gender-focused research. Here, despite the epistemic power accorded to the more biophysical disciplines with which Marlène works, she has found surprising common ground and a convergence with technical colleagues. They have shared their frustrations with project cycles and the timelines for delivering research outcomes and impact within the logics of donor project frameworks. In breeding programs, for example, projects may have a 20 year run when starting to

breed for something and before there is measurable impact. Discussions around this have contributed to a better understanding between social science and technical colleagues.

Marlène: I heard one of my colleagues say that when he works on trees it can take him 15 years to get some data, as opposed to social science where you ‘just go out and do a survey’. That was very interesting because that’s how I feel too [about short time frames for making a difference]. Seeing any kind of change takes a long time in society and in social relations, so being expected to report in three years on how you changed gender relations is not a reasonable request.

Other measures of success that Marlène has to consider include wider evaluations of the gender mainstreaming program itself, and in particular, how quantitative data on this may be used to evaluate impact. This can include the amount of funding set aside for social science and gender research, compared to funding allocated for other types of research within CGIAR Research Programs. In most CRPs, very substantial amounts of funds are directed towards breeding (which is expensive to execute) whereas a gender research project might require significantly less funding but in reality, be very impactful.

Marlène: There’s so much money in breeding compared to everything else. We previously had to report year-on-year on gender budgeting to show the gender responsiveness of our research portfolios. If only ten percent of the project budget is on gender research, is it gender responsive? How meaningful is that measure? If the gender research has steered the whole program, it is not about having the same money but about influence. For example, it can be about being able to influence how the project is going to be run and what you are breeding for, how a new breed fits with the bigger picture in terms of influencing gender relations and so on.

The suggestion that ‘impact’ is made intelligible when it is given a monetary value is typical of the market logic that underpins project evaluation within the dominant development vocabulary (Davids et al., 2014). Given these issues, we were interested in discussing whether there were differences in perspective over what kinds of change BI was working towards, and whether such differences also created a structural disincentive for meaningful and transformatory gender work. In particular, how is the link between research impact and increases in productivity being understood, given the criticism of this from feminist political ecology (see Chapter 6)?

Marlène: In this organisation the focus is biodiversity management and conservation, so if there is emphasis on productivity, it is through biodiversity. For example, if you are adding biodiversity to a cropping system to manage pests, you may need to show that you are also increasing or at least not creating any losses to productivity. From a gender perspective, you would question

whether productivity should necessarily be a goal to begin with. As critical as I am, when in the field I hear a lot of women and men farmers saying it is extremely important to them. Obviously there are many different aspects to that story: questions around labour, markets, and when you think that more than 30 percent of food that is produced is lost along the value chain, you wonder if productivity is really where so many efforts should go – especially if it takes 10, 15, 20 years to breed a crop with a higher productivity. At least the CGIAR is broadening its vision beyond productivity now by talking about ‘sustainable food systems’.

What about other forms of change, and in particular attitudes towards gender transformation within BI and beyond? As Marlène notes, CGIAR Research Programs and centres need to demonstrate commitments to gender mainstreaming through their gender strategies, research, and inclusion of gender specialists among their scientists. But what about change in terms of gender equality within the communities in which BI works? Is there some hesitancy there?

Marlène: This is something I come across all the time. Some colleagues say: ‘we don’t want to interfere with people’s lives’, that changing their productivity is not the same as changing social values. There are different ideas about what kind of interventions are acceptable. Gender research strikes at the core of societal values, and according to some colleagues it is hegemonic – we are imposing our norms on how societies should be. It is good that these issues surface, but they [those within the CGIAR and BI expressing this view] don’t think of their own work as being intrusive. They don’t see that a commitment to raising productivity or encouraging market integration is also pushing a certain norm about how a society should be.

Put bluntly, scientific research for development and a universalising approach to gender equity are both part of the same hegemonic development discourse that narrows social development concerns to particular issues (e.g. productivity, market integration). In that respect, singling out gender research for the charge of intrusion and changing people’s values is misplaced (Narayanaswamy, 2016). However, there is opportunity in the slow and contextual approach to knowledge and transformative learning that we have discussed in the preceding section for deeper reflection, which might include consideration of a universalising coloniality in development *and* gender research. Through such reflection, researchers and practitioners might consider ways to push against the logics of environment and development practice where these elide or even damage the diverse interests and concerns of women and men in different communities.

Conclusion

Within a research-for-development organisation such as Bioversity International, the role of the gender specialist is expansive and complex, embracing critical

pedagogies to build effective multi-disciplinary teams whilst navigating the practical, political and technical challenges set by the logics of donor-driven project design, execution and evaluation. As Marlène notes, gender professionals in this field are tasked not only with situating complex social systems within the environmental and poverty contexts that mutually constitute them, but also with ‘transforming’ these socio-environmental systems. Transformation must occur within a short temporal scale that is not commensurate with the time required to facilitate lasting social change. The social change must be measurable, often quantitatively, using indicators that do not adequately capture processes such as empowerment, and that may leave little room for understanding the significance of change from local women’s and men’s own perspectives.

The task at hand for BI (and the CGIAR more broadly) is also to produce models or approaches that can be replicated across geographies, sometimes globally, despite the context-specificity of social relations and cultures. This must happen in interdisciplinary teams where members from different disciplines, cultures and genders negotiate their own social relations, and where some team members resist the idea of gender equality as a research outcome, based on a reluctance to intervene in the ‘private’ lives of project ‘beneficiaries’, not recognising that the technocratic fixes they propose already do. Marlène’s insights have revealed some of the paradoxes of gender research in an applied context, where the expectations of donors that fund the research for development system run the risk of hindering the possibilities of conducting quality, qualitative research on gender relations from which meaningful social change can be built.

Where Marlène has been able to point to success are those relational instances with colleagues and research teams in which a process of discovery and ‘learning with’ enables long-lasting changes in approaches to research. The visceral and embodied forms of learning that are possible in the field where people are able to see the world differently, and gently adjust their sensitivity to questions of gender equity chime with approaches to critical field-based pedagogy, and offer opportunities for dismantling epistemological divisions within multi-disciplinary teams. For Marlène, leveraging these transformative moments will involve a greater commitment to ‘slow research’ that includes opportunities for deepening contextual engagement, embracing different forms of expert knowledge (across disciplines, across geographies) and critical reflection with others. This means going beyond developing a common scientific language and rendering gender technical in the process, but instead taking seriously other ways of working and forms of knowledge in ‘agriculture for development’ (A4D) that is meaningful for people and their communities.

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