2 Is epistemic authority masculine?

Reflections on gender, status and knowledge in international agricultural research and development

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In conversation with Gordon Prain*

A defining feature of feminist political ecology (FPE) is that it interrogates power around knowledge production and the positionality of the knower in a world divided in intersecting ways along lines of gender, class, social status, and age. It was in this same spirit that feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code, then a young scholar in 1981, was compelled to pose the question, ‘Is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant?’ Indeed, FPE owes a huge debt to feminist epistemology in positing that the bearer of knowledge – the knower – is embodied, situated and embedded as opposed to an unmediated, faceless, context-free and bodiless knower standing ‘from an aloof and elevated position of surveillance’ (which Haraway (1988) refers to as the ‘god trick’ or the view from nowhere). In short, one’s social location (gender being one such dimension) both shapes and limits one’s knowing (Lykke, 2010; Haraway, 1988).

But what about knowledge itself – are some types of knowledge more hegemonic, or considered superior? This question resonates with the growing numbers of women gender experts in science, environment and technology organisations, where they face often implicit social hierarchies that intersect what they know with who they are. Whose knowledge counts? What role, if any, does professional identity, and the composition of one’s professional field, play with regard to one’s gender, ethnicity, class, age and the reception of one’s work? Are there straightforward associations between the epistemic authority of techno-scientific knowledge with masculinity as contemporary scholars sometimes claim? (MacGregor, 2010; Sismondo, 2004). The insights from a long career history can give us clues to the relationship between knowledge, identity and power.

Gordon Prain, male senior researcher in the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) global agricultural innovation network, is a social scientist and gender expert who looks back at 30 years of engagement in various positions, mostly within the International Potato Center (CIP). CIP is an organisation dedicated to improving the livelihoods of low income farming families through research and development of roots and tuber crops. Through social science research within CIP and through his later membership of the Participatory

Research and Gender Analysis (PRGA) Program, a cross-centre program of the CGIAR, he devoted time with agricultural research professionals to explore with them who ‘the farmer’ was. He eventually discovered that they generally understood ‘the farmer’ as the male farmer. His recognition of this biased view was the beginning of a long career as a gender expert as well as social scientist in the CGIAR system.

Through first-hand experience, Gordon narrates to us how a global research-for-development organisation began to accommodate gender dimensions in its strategic programming and research activities. The landmark emergence of participatory development in the 1980s threw open the gates for social issues and questions to inhabit future agricultural research. Under the aegis of participatory development, the entry of gender research catalysed debates on whether it was enough to include women in agricultural development processes; or whether the kind of development that was enveloping the rural world was widening gender and wealth gaps, and therefore it was instead the locus of needed change and intervention.

Participatory development unpacks ‘the farmer’

Gordon: I am recently officially retired, but I still work as a consultant. I’ve been working for the CGIAR for more than 30 years. I’m an anthropologist and I’ve been leading social and nutrition sciences at CIP in recent years. For 10 years I was also global coordinator of a CGIAR system-wide initiative called Urban Harvest, which undertook research and development initiatives on urban and peri-urban agriculture, and urban environmental issues. My gender professionalism has come through applied social science work, I would say, over a long period of time. I think a lot of people of my generation working on gender were strongly influenced by the emergence of participatory research.

Becky: I think that it’s interesting how participatory research has been an entry point for a number of people into this world of gender. It’s interesting what’s coming through also from this is how this approach opened a lot of doors for social questions and that was almost the more transformative moment in agricultural research than what we’re seeing now with a recent push for gender analysis.

Gordon: I coordinated an R&D network called UPWARD for seven years in Asia. The acronym stands for Users’ Perspectives with Agricultural Research and Development and it focused attention on the end-users of agricultural innovations, in other words farming communities and farming households. And, of course, when you start looking at those users’ perspectives or points of view, you have to look at both men’s and women’s perspectives. And so that experience was quite influential in professionalising, if you like, my own sort of approach to gender. That work in Asia with users’ perspectives increased the attention towards gender. We were listening to men and women’s voices, differentiating men and women’s needs, as well as supporting

technology adaptation that was appropriate for both men and women, and the overall attention we were paying to gender percolated through to the senior management within CIP and to other scientists, but not yet then in a very well-articulated way. In other words, at that stage, we were articulating the importance of listening to users, and within that, we were pointing out that users were not generic but different since in international and national agricultural and environmental research scientists mostly simply referred to 'the farmer' in aggregate terms. Tacitly, it was a male farmer. We were pointing out that you have to disaggregate, you have to understand women and men's different needs. So, I think it had an influence, but it wasn't a sufficiently strong influence in moving the Center (CIP) forward in terms of its own institutionalisation of gender issues, but it was a fair start. But since 2000, in cross-Center initiatives and programs like Participatory Research and Gender Analysis (PRGA), Urban Harvest, the new CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs), especially on Roots, Tubers and Bananas (RTB), and most recently through GENNOVATE, a cross-CRP project seeking to enable gender equality in agricultural and environmental innovation, I had a much more active and direct role in articulating gender as a policy and organisational principle since I was advising or leading teams of researchers and gender professionals across a number of CGIAR Centres to conduct gender research and develop gender strategies within research programs.

Certainly, the institutional space for these recent opportunities in gender research and policy change has been strongly influenced by changes in donor priorities. For at least the last 15 years there has been growing pressure on leaders and senior management across the CGIAR to take up gender more seriously.

From the early 1980s, participatory rural development was influential in large part due to a growing discontent with how development initiatives in the global South were being implemented, especially the 'top down' 'transfer of technology (TOT) model underpinning actions that despite the Green Revolution left millions of the most marginalised communities still in poverty (Biggs, 1990; Horton et al., 1989). These problems of mainstream economic development led to the nurturing of more inclusive and less 'top-down' approaches. Robert Chambers was an early pioneer on this. In his landmark book, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983), he spelt out the disconnect between development professionals and the poor, the need for participatory development. The recognition of the power dimensions of 'rural poverty unperceived', as Chamber's opening chapter is called, was fertile ground for recognising gender inequality in development: 'In crop research, priority, prestige and promotion have gone with work on crops for export, grown usually by plantations, large farmers, the better off small farmers, and the men of the household rather than the women' (Chambers, 1983: 77). Henceforth, debates followed on whether it was a matter for women to be included in development (WID or Women-in-Development framework), or whether development itself was a problematic site of unequal gender and power relations (GAD, or Gender and Development framework) in the first place. GAD demanded a revamp

and overturning of the dominant development model that caused disadvantage to women on many fronts (Rathgeber, 1990). This distinction between WID and GAD was important since each led to a distinct analytical and implementation practice. Today, we are witnessing an incipient resurgence of this debate as socialist feminist scholars are calling for a re-examination of the dominant model of development that is premised on neoliberal economic growth. Those taking this position are critical of the neoliberal tendencies of influential strains of feminism that stress the economic inclusion of women rather than change of the model of ‘development’ itself (Funk, 2012; Prügl, 2015; Fraser, 2009). In research organisations where gender is a consideration, there were moments that this debate had real impacts on how gender integration in research was to proceed, and in some instances, the debate stalled the process. Gordon recalls one moment of stasis.

Gordon: There was an internally commissioned review of the Participatory Research and Gender Analysis (PRGA) program of the CGIAR in 2000 of which I was the Chair. We definitely found that the participatory components of PRGA were way ahead and more successfully implemented than the gender analysis component. Whereas the participatory research component helped mainstream participatory plant breeding and achieved a wide dissemination of participatory tools in international and national research organisations, the gender analysis component was rather bogged down in theoretical disputes, especially around women in development versus gender (and development) analysis. At the time we did the review there was a limited application of gender analysis or the use of gender tools in research activities. As a result, we were critical of that weakness in the program, recognising that participatory development as a research strategy did not have a strong gender analysis component. At that stage PRGA wasn’t able to articulate – let’s say in a clear, conceptual way – the gender analysis aspects. But in the practice of participatory research such as in participatory plant breeding, people were paying attention to what women and men were asking for in terms of varieties, in terms of traits, and so on. So later in 2005–2006, more attention was paid to gender analysis.

The landing of gender issues and analyses was not smooth in the world’s largest international agricultural research network. It collided with the organisation’s traditional technical focus and came at a time when ontological debates within gender and development were being sorted out. Nevertheless, participatory development ushered in the social dimensions of agricultural development. On the ground, Gordon witnessed how technical and social professionals began to seek ways to relate to each other. In the next section, we pay more attention to how professional identities and knowledge are inter-connected through relations of power.

Situated identities

The evolution of gender knowledge in the CGIAR shaped how Gordon charted his career as a gender professional in rural and agricultural development. The

growing knowledge of and dedication to research on gender stretched and bended alongside Gordon's own rise to seniority in a context where overall, gender studies continued to remain less important than other types of knowledge.

Babette: Many agricultural development organisations are male-dominated but the gender experts I know in those organisations are mostly women. It's not all the time that a man gets to be a gender professional, and I'm just curious how you eventually came to that point, Gordon, in that your colleagues, or the organisation you worked for, actually came to recognise you as a gender professional. What sort of led you to that point? And how has it been received?

Gordon: I think people have come to see me as a kind of spokesperson for the intended beneficiaries of the work going on in the Centre, and in the broader CG [short name for the CGIAR system], in a way. There was an expectation for me to constantly remind people developing technologies that their work should be socially relevant. For example, have they asked the right questions about the people they work with? And then, in that, have they listened to the different demands coming from men and women? As a social scientist who's spent a lot of years in the CGIAR, I heard a lot of moaning and groaning [laughter] about being the underdog from other social scientists. Constantly put down, constantly not listened to, and very much of a second-class citizen. And that's probably the most common story among social scientists.

But as a man, I've not been made to feel that. Yes, as a young anthropologist I was ignored by the senior bio-physical scientists, but I've not suffered. I've not been marginalised to the extent that women gender researchers have been marginalised. I think that's fair to say, that it's been very difficult often for women social scientists to be heard in a bio-physical science environment. I've always argued very strongly, and I still do with my colleagues who are women gender professionals, that the first kind of step along the road to being heard is to understand as much as you can of the technical side of things. I really emphasise that. There should be at least understanding on what breeders are doing, and why they're doing what they're doing. What are the concerns of people involved in integrated pest management? What is involved with the whole issue of seed? Why is seed so important? These things, for a gender professional, are extremely important to understand to enable them to engage technical people in conversations about those issues. I was so heavily involved in issues of women and men's on-farm conservation of crop genetic diversity at one stage of my career that I was taken for an enlightened geneticist! With this understanding of the technical dimension, we can then start to point out how technologies can do harm or good and anticipate possible gender traps. If gender professionals come from a position of complete innocence around those technical issues, it then makes the job extremely difficult.

So, what I'm trying to say is that, yes, I've had an easier time as a man but at the same time, I was engaged in a field that was not as important as other fields. But you have to understand where people in these fields are coming

from and then respond in as strong a way as possible to their ideas and present the relevance of gender to their fields. I think that this kind of conversation is now taking place. And I now feel very comfortable putting gender right at the top of the agenda of agricultural research. It's not always been like that.

Becky: You mentioned about having an easier time as a man. Do you mean that you are being taken seriously in a kind of interpersonal context? So, when you walk into a room, do you think people are more likely to listen to you than, say, a young woman with a background on gender? Is that what you mean?

Gordon: I think it is that. But what I'm not sure about, and this is where one has to be very careful is that in recent years, I've had a senior position. So, it is difficult to disentangle gender from rank and position. Or from status, if you like. Doing gender work within the new CGIAR Research Programs, I feel as though people have really listened to me because I was one of the very few senior researchers who actually was heavily involved in gender.

Babette: It's helpful for gender, but I was wondering if you walked into a room and there was a woman, let's say, in a meeting, and she was not a gender specialist or professional, but rather, she was a technical person, shall we say, a geneticist or a crop scientist. Who would be more listened to?

Gordon: Well, again [laughter], if it was in 1988 or 1987, for sure that she would have had the much more important voice and people would have listened to her much more. I worked with a woman geneticist, a breeder, in the 1980s in Latin America and we were working together on developing new varieties and testing them with farming communities, men and women. I think it was a very powerful combination in a way. At that time, I was very junior, but nevertheless, it was the voice of a male anthropologist who was pushing to listen to men and women about which varieties were important. The woman breeder listened to me about how to adjust her work and how to consult with different household members about the development of these new varieties.

In 2010, as a more senior social scientist and male gender researcher, I would have been listened to as much as a woman breeder. Whether I would have been **heard** is another matter and remains a question. Even in 2010, I doubt that a young woman gender specialist would have been listened to as much as a woman breeder. We are dealing with multiple identities linked to gender, age and disciplinary status: intersectional power differences which we need to disentangle.

From his recollections as a young anthropologist negotiating a social research agenda with plant breeders, Gordon's stature changed as he gradually attained seniority. His positionality as a western white man, senior in the profession, and a social scientist in a technical research organisation indicates to us that power, identity and knowledge are co-created. At some critical junctures in his organisation's history, his privileged positionality has been able to temper internal resistance to the entry of non-technical epistemological fields such as gender studies. However, this has not fully led to equal epistemic status with the technical sciences, which

then dents Gordon's privileged position as a senior scientist. Whereas most studies explore multiple oppressions, Gordon's story emphasises the peculiar situated character of intersectionality: that of experiencing simultaneous marginalisation and privilege through fluid identities and interactions shaped by the dynamics of epistemic power and authority in this specific work environment. Intersectionality scholars further warn us not to see multiple and interlocking identities of gender, class, age, race as static and caught in a gridlock. By empirically recognising them, and 'how they work' and change over time and context, they allow us to unpack institutional power and epistemic dynamics that have enabled them to take shape and emerge at critical moments (Cho et al., 2013; Garry, 2011; Vita et al., 2016).

Gordon has had the privileged experience of looking back at a long career history interlaced with shifting positionalities that enabled positive interactions with technical specialists. Younger gender professionals may have slightly different intersectional experiences and trajectories as they engage in gender mainstreaming research for agricultural development.

Interactions with technical specialists and young gender professionals

Becky: Were there positive collaborative experiences with technical scientists?

Gordon: Cases of collaboration were very specific. I want to emphasise that within the CGIAR, CIP has been one of the most successful International Research Centers in pioneering collaboration between technical and social scientists, especially in relation to participatory 'bottom up' field research. Collaborative experiences were often very intensive and successful at the level of the individual in the sense that the individual technical person took on and understood the relevance and importance of engaging directly with farmers and of understanding gender. But there were few outcomes beyond that individual. I think that was the biggest challenge of that time, moving from individual to institutional change.

I worked with geneticists and plant breeders in Peru and Indonesia who were interested in conserving crop genetic diversity and using that diversity to develop new varieties of potato and sweet potato. In the Peruvian experience the plant breeder, who already had exposure to social sciences through her siblings, was very open to collaboration in order to develop a new variety with a certain type of resistance to a soil pest seriously affecting high altitude potato cultivation, on which communities depended for food. And so, I encouraged her and introduced her to a methodology of how to tap into the voices of women and men farmers about the kind of preferences and concerns they had around potato varieties, the things that were causing them problems, and so on. We had a systematic process of evaluation involving men and women. And from that breeding work, I think more people – both women and men benefited. And in the end, she actually released a variety with a woman's name [laughter]. I think she really took on the importance of understanding

differences and preferences between men and women farmers, and which she incorporated into her work. But it didn't go any further than that within CIP's plant breeding program.

In West Papua, in the Indonesian half of New Guinea, I worked with a geneticist to collect and document sweet potato varieties. This is a secondary center of diversity of the crop, the main food staple and central to local culture. The documentation process involved talking to men and women about the large number of varieties they cultivated and used. And it clearly came out that there were very different preoccupations in terms of the types of varieties and the qualities that were important to women and men. This geneticist was not at all sensitive to gender issues before we started working. We had a very intensive period of plant collection in New Guinea. And that very down-to-earth experience had an impact on him. But again, it didn't seem to go any further than that.

At a more programmatic level, I was responsible for a program related to urban agriculture. We had a strong focus on gender in that program, including the co-production with a Dutch foundation of a volume of methods and case studies called 'Women Feeding Cities' (Hovorka et al., 2009). We wanted to move from talking to action. We felt one way to do that was to actually get into a research partnership with a technical seed specialist and to work together on data collection. It was clear that there was a need to undertake joint action between a gender specialist and a technical scientist. We also had to bring our own financial resources. It's easier for researchers to say that we should be paying attention to men and women than to actually allocate resources to do that.

So, the work was completed with interesting results that were published as a journal article (Njenga et al., 2011). But when it came to present the results of this work in public – to a CIP science meeting – only the technical aspects of what had been achieved were presented, not the gender dimensions.

Gordon: Coming back to my earlier discussion of the CGIAR System-wide Initiative on Participatory Research and Gender Analysis (PRGA), I want to comment on how the program tried, early on, to strengthen gender analysis within the different International Agricultural Research Centers which participated. One strategy, which was actually inherited from the earlier gender program within the CGIAR which was responsible for both gender in the workplace as well as gender in research, involved naming 'Center Liaisons', predominantly young and often female researchers tasked to push the gender agenda within the research programs of those Centers. But to be honest, those positions were fairly invisible. They had no institutional recognition, no funding and as the 2000 internally commissioned external review found, no clear terms of reference. The gender liaisons were marginalised from Center decision-making, and they had other responsibilities and other bosses to deal with, and so had little chance to influence the gender agenda.

Although the climate for gender research in the CGIAR has considerably improved in the past five or six years, especially in terms of funding, young

gender researchers still face problems. GENNOVATE is a global research project aimed at enabling equality in agricultural and environmental innovation through an understanding of gender norms and agency, which began in 2013. It involves a majority of CGIAR Centers and Research Programs and many of the researchers involved in the project are fairly junior. Whereas in some cases these young researchers have received generous financial and professional support from CRP leaders, in other cases they have had big struggles with securing resources and have not been able to make the types of time commitment which have been really needed. They've had to prioritise other work because they didn't have the voice to argue for the importance of their work for GENNOVATE.

One of the factors behind this is the historical development of gender within the CGIAR. Except for a few cases, there have not really been career paths available for gender specialists which would lead to the existence of significant numbers of senior gender specialists within the system. I was responsible for recruiting the first gender specialists in CIP. The first direct hiring of an individual with a full gender specialist portfolio in CIP was in 2013, so it's a recent phenomenon. There are other Centers of the CGIAR with longer track records of hiring specialists to work on gender (CGIAR-IEA (2017),* but even in these Centers, senior staff like myself working on gender were hired originally as economists or cultural anthropologists rather than gender specialists. The 2010 annual portfolio report of the CGIAR system noted 'the need to develop proper capacity to address gender equity in research and product development' and that the individual Program reports 'provide fragmented snippets of gender-related research derived from milestones (activities) scattered in Program logframes' (CGIAR Consortium Office 2012: 8). But definitely, there was an important improvement in the situation with the establishment of the Consortium Gender Network in 2012, coordinated by Jacqueline Ashby. The network's initiative in establishing post-doctoral fellowships for gender specialists was an important contribution to bring in more gender specialists, albeit new junior positions.

I think it remains to be seen how their careers will develop in the system. And the extent to which, when there's funding pressure, gender positions will be retained. That's really an important issue. In CIP, my position has not been replaced because of funding constraints. So there's been a sort of erosion of people in senior positions with a strong gender focus, or with strong gender responsibility.

Babette: I don't think this is a situation exclusive to environment organisations, CIP or the CGIAR, Gordon. I think that in many places, gender focal points are people who are tasked to do gender mainstreaming on top of other duties

* This assessment of gender in the CGIAR was regrettably based only on the CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs) rather than the Centers where staff are actually hired, so this is an indirect view of the growth of gender capacity within the CGIAR System

and where there are gender specialists, their jobs are the first to go when funding thins out. This is widespread even in many government organisations.

To conclude

We began by asking whether epistemic authority is masculine. Our discussion in this chapter shows that it is not masculine, in an essentialised, permanent sense. An intersectional analysis makes us understand that the social context and the specific dynamics of knowledge and power co-create and interlock multiple subjectivities that are not fixed but are changing and in constant relation with others. This analysis allows us to foreground the political and social dynamics that lead to experiences of marginalisation and privilege. Gordon's long career history highlighted the complexity and fluidity of professional identities and interactions in relation to the hierarchies of knowledge in his organisation.

Our conversations also discussed that breakthrough moments through mutual learning and joint efforts at research integration between gender and technical professionals are clearly possible, especially in an enabling policy environment. But, realistically, as Gordon's accounts indicated to us, there are limits for as long as epistemic inequalities – that translate to resource inequities – underlie the trajectory of agricultural research for development. Gordon sums up the possible reforms in this field:

One of the conducive factors is the intensive interpersonal collaboration on the ground. Undoubtedly a second conducive factor is the control of funds in the hands of researchers who want to include gender in the analysis in the research work. If you look at the overall goals of the CGIAR and their alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, the commitments to poverty alleviation, to equity, all those commitments clearly require gender to be a central part of research. But the problem is that many biophysical scientists do not yet make that connection, or if they make the connection in theory, it is still difficult to allocate funds for gender in the implementation of projects that they lead. This will require parallel changes at institutional and policy level that prioritise resource allocation, monitoring systems and personnel and project evaluation.

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