



# WHAT IS GENDER?

Gender is defined by FAO as ‘the relations between men and women, both perceptual and material. Gender is not determined biologically, as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men, but is constructed socially. It is a central organizing principle of societies, and often governs the processes of production and reproduction, consumption and distribution’ (FAO, 1997). Despite this definition, gender is often misunderstood as being the promotion of women only. However, as we see from the FAO definition, gender issues focus on women and on the relationship between men and women, their roles, access to and control over resources, division of labour, interests and needs. Gender relations affect household security, family well-being, planning, production and many other aspects of life (Bravo-Baumann, 2000).

## [Box 1] DEFINITION OF GENDER ROLES AND GENDER RELATIONS

**Gender roles** are the ‘social definition’ of women and men. They vary among different societies and cultures, classes, ages and during different periods in history. Gender-specific roles and responsibilities are often conditioned by household structure, access to resources, specific impacts of the global economy, and other locally relevant factors such as ecological conditions (FAO, 1997).

**Gender relations** are the ways in which a culture or society defines rights, responsibilities, and the identities of men and women in relation to one another (Bravo-Baumann, 2000).

Rural people’s roles, as food producers and food providers, link them directly to the management and sustainable use of agrobiodiversity. Through their daily work, rural people have accumulated knowledge and skills concerning their ecosystems, local crop varieties, animal breeds, agricultural systems and the nutritional values of various underused plants. They have become adept at maintaining their own scarce resources. Men and women act differently, because of their socially ascribed roles; therefore they have different sets of knowledge and needs.

Experience shows that agricultural, environmental and related policies and programmes do not differentiate between male and female farmers. Therefore, they often fail to recognize the differences between men’s and women’s work, knowledge, contributions and needs. This has significant consequences for biodiversity as well as for gender equality. For example, Box 2 illustrates that in Bafoulabé region (Mali), women have more knowledge about the traditional rice varieties than men, as rice was traditionally considered as a women’s crop.

## [Box 2] GENDER DIFFERENCES IN KNOWLEDGE OF TRADITIONAL RICE VARIETIES IN MALI

In Bafoulabé region in Mali, rice was traditionally considered a female crop. It was grown near rivers or where water stagnated during the rainy season. Women would take care of the field individually or in a group. Their knowledge of landraces was vast. They could identify 30 different varieties by growth cycle, plant growth habit, plant height, number of stems, grain yield, grain size, form, colour, preparation quality, utilization and taste of the end product. Men had very little knowledge of traditional rice varieties, but they had the main responsibility for three improved rice varieties introduced to the village.

Source: Synnevag, 1997.



Both men and women farmers play an important role as decision-makers in agrobiodiversity management. They decide when to plant, harvest and process their crops. They decide how much of each crop variety to plant each year, how much seed to save from their own production and what to buy or exchange. All these decisions affect the total amount of genetic diversity that is conserved and used.

In most farming systems, there is a division of labour. This determines the different tasks for which men and women are responsible. Generally, women have an important role in the production, processing, preservation, preparation and sale of staple crops. Men tend to focus on market-oriented or cash crop production. Often we find a division in crop and livestock management practices. Weeding is often a women's task, while spraying or fertilizer application is mainly carried out by men. Women and children often look after the smaller livestock species and men are often in charge of cattle. These are only a few examples, which are not generally applicable, but will depend on the specific situations and cultures we are working.

[Box 3] **GENDER AND AGE-SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES REGARDING THE COLLECTION, PREPARATION AND CONSUMPTION OF WILD-FOOD PLANTS IN RURAL ETHIOPIA**

Mostly children collect and eat the fruit from wild plants. Other wild-food and famine-food plants are collected by children and women and prepared by the latter in all the areas surveyed. Women frequently collect wild-food when they are on their way to fetch water, collect firewood, go to market, and when walking home from their fields.

Able-bodied male members of the community usually migrate to find work during food shortage. Women and children are left behind to manage as best they can. Therefore, women and children are the main actors concerning the collection, preparation and consumption of wild-food plants. Children forage and climb trees for collection while women do the preparation and the cooking.

In normal times, young rural males eat more wild foods than the older generation. Although, when there is a food shortage, all ages and both sexes eat the wild foods to satisfy their need for additional nourishment, traditional fulfillment and local curative treatments. This includes consumption of *Embelia schimperi* (*enkoko* in Amharic), a fruit that is eaten to control intestinal parasites.

Source: Guinand and Lemessa, 2000.

Women are often involved in the selection, improvement and adaptation of plant varieties. They often have more specialized knowledge of wild plants used for food, fodder and medicine than men (see Box 2 and 3). Men and women may be responsible for different crops, or varieties, or be responsible for different tasks related to one crop.

Recent decades have witnessed substantial gains in agricultural productivity and rapid advances in agricultural technology. These advances have often bypassed women farmers and reduced their productivity. Frequently the changes were linked to credit requirements that were either inaccessible to women, or were not tailored to their needs and demands. Therefore, women face a variety of gender-based constraints as farmers and managers of natural resources. In order to meet the challenges of food production for the increasing population, countries must find ways to overcome this gap in productivity.



## GENDER AND AGROBIODIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

There are increasing concerns that the vital contribution of women to the management of biological resources, and to economic production generally, has been misunderstood, ignored, or underestimated (Howard, 2003). Women are the sole breadwinners in one-third of all households in the world. In poor families, with two adults, more than half the available income is from the labour of women and children. Furthermore, women direct more of their earnings to meet basic needs. Women produce 80 percent of the food in Africa, 60 percent in Asia and 40 percent in Latin America (Howard, 2003).

Women tend to be more actively involved than men in the household economy. This typically involves the use of a much wider diversity of species for food and medicine than are traded in regional or international markets. Women generally have the primary responsibility of providing their families with food, water, fuel, medicines, fibres, fodder and other products. Often they need to rely on a healthy and diverse ecosystem for a cash income. As a result, rural women are the most knowledgeable about the patterns and uses of local biodiversity. Yet, these same women are often denied access to land and resources. In many countries, such as Kenya, women have access only to the most marginal land – medicinal plants are collected along road banks and fence rows and fuel is collected in the de facto commons – land too far from villages to be claimed by men.

Gender issues cut across agrobiodiversity management activities in several ways. First, agrobiodiversity management is community-based, and requires the support of the entire community – young and old, rich and poor, men and women, boys and girls. Because women play a restricted or invisible role in the public affairs of many communities, special steps need to be taken so that women are consulted on agrobiodiversity management.

Tradition may dictate that the household head speaks for the household. However, many men are not sufficiently aware of women's concerns to raise them adequately in public meetings. Hence, other ways must be found to tap women's knowledge, needs and requirements, and to determine their commitment and contributions to agrobiodiversity management.

Second, men and women use agrobiodiversity in different ways and have diverse allocation and conservation measures. Agrobiodiversity management therefore requires information, participation in decision-making, management and commitment from both sexes.

Moreover, in several regions, women's roles and responsibilities are greater than ever because of male migration to urban areas. Frequently, men are absent from rural homes because they leave to earn an alternative income. This creates de facto female-headed households, where the men may retain decision-making power, even though the women are managing the farm and household on their own for long periods. This feminization of agriculture may indicate that women are obtaining more decision-making power with regard to agrobiodiversity management.

Because of these above-mentioned tendencies, it is important for us to recognize that gender considerations in agrobiodiversity always need to take into account both men's and women's roles, responsibilities, interests and needs. Furthermore, within these two groups, we need to be aware of other differences that need to be taken into consideration: those of age, ethnicity and social status.

Failure to consider these differences, between men and women, leads to unsuccessful project activities. It may also lead to the marginalization of a major sector of society and a large part of the agricultural workforce. Thus, understanding gender relationships, and adjusting methods and messages, is crucial for the full participation of all sectors of the community.



## Key points

- Mainstream agricultural, environmental and related policies and programmes tend to see farmers as men. Or, no differentiation is made between male and female farmers.
- Rural men's and women's roles, as food producers and providers, link them directly to the management and sustainable use of agrobiodiversity.
- Both men and women farmers play an important role as decision-makers in agrobiodiversity management. All of these decisions affect the total amount of genetic diversity that is conserved and used.
- In most farming systems there is a division of labour, which determines the different and complementary tasks for which men and women are responsible.
- Women tend to be more actively involved than men in the household economy, which typically involves the use of a much wider diversity of species for food and medicine than are traded in regional or international markets.
- There are increasing concerns that the vital contribution of women to the management of biological resources, and to economic production generally, has been misunderstood, ignored, or underestimated.

## References

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## Web site

FAO Web site on gender: [www.fao.org/Gender/gender.htm](http://www.fao.org/Gender/gender.htm)

FAO Web site on sustainable development issues: [www.fao.org/sd/index\\_en.htm](http://www.fao.org/sd/index_en.htm)

FAO Web site for Gender, Agrobiodiversity and Local Knowledge: [www.fao.org/sd/links](http://www.fao.org/sd/links)

## Additional background papers

FAO. 1999. Women-users, preservers and managers of agrobiodiversity. Rome.

Torkelsson, A. 2003. Gender in agricultural biodiversity conservation. *in* Conservation and sustainable use of agricultural biodiversity. Manila, CIP-UPWARD in partnership with GTZ, IDRC, IPGRI and SEARICE.



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