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## The Interview: How can we integrate gender in the research process?

Submitted by Martina Antonucci on October 6, 2016



Mrs. Bezalet Dessalegn, livelihoods and development specialist at ICARDA

We sat with Mrs. Bezalet Dessalegn, a livelihoods and development specialist to discuss the challenges of integrating gender in the research process in order to increase the participation and empowerment of women in rural dryland communities. Mrs. Bezalet Dessalegn has been working at the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas ([ICARDA](#)) since 2011.

She holds a BA in Economics, MScs in International Development and in Community Change, and is an ABD in International Relations and Public Policy. Currently, she manages the Water and Livelihoods Initiative ([WLI](#)), and serves as the gender focal person for the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Eco-Systems ([WLE](#)) within ICARDA's Integrated Water and Land Management Program ([IWLMP](#)). Her projects span several countries including Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Palestine (West Bank), Tunisia, and Yemen.

**Research can make big contributions to address gender inequality. However, gender is often not fully integrated into the research process. In your opinion, why it is important to include gender considerations in a research project?**

Including gender into research allows for a **deeper understanding of the community** you are working with. Although most of the projects now require socio-economic characterization of study areas, in many cases, such studies provide superficial information which needs to be unpacked in order to

identify the underlying and instrumental causes of the challenges we hope to address through our research.

A gendered characterization of the community we are working in allows us to get better insights into the complexities associated with **decision making processes**, and factors that influence **access and control of resources** - which are critical components of natural resource management. For example, if we are working on a project that aims to improve the adoption and use of improved irrigation technologies but we do not know who among the society is responsible for irrigating agricultural fields, who controls access to irrigation water, etc., we may end up making impractical recommendations with potentially adverse effects on selected groups of the society.

It is thus quite useful to understand the **gender roles** in a society/community in order to design appropriate technologies and encourage technology adoption. By integrating gender into our research, our questions will be better refined, our technologies will be better targeted, and the likelihood of technology adoption will be improved.

### **What are the major challenges science is facing in addressing gender equality?**

I think one of the biggest challenges for agricultural science is the tendency to work in “silos” - with each discipline focusing on its own domain of interest. This, of course, is quite contrary to the reality on the ground as decisions on livelihood strategies are influenced by a much more complex inter-linkages of bio-physical and socio-economic factors. Social hierarchy, the role of culture, gender, religion, policies and institutions play critical roles in influencing farmers’ decisions in agriculture. **Interdisciplinary gender research** will give us better insights on what challenges to focus on, what technologies and innovation practices to promote, for what group of the society, and how.

Another challenge is in **delivering research results to the intended beneficiaries**, or to institutions that are better positioned to do so. We recently completed a study under the WLI, which aimed to explore some of the reasons why technologies that were tried and tested, proven and ready to be out scaled - were barely adopted by farmers. We looked at it from the perspective of researchers, farmers and extension agents to see where the communication breakdown was. And we saw that it was at all levels! There are clear **communication gaps** between researchers and farmers, farmers and extensions agents; as well as researchers and extension agents. Research institutions have to do more to appropriately package and share their research outputs with multiple stakeholders. Improved agricultural technologies and packages are indeed critical and highly in demand, but if they cannot be accessed and used by the intended beneficiaries, we miss big opportunities, and in the end everybody loses.

### **What else can be done better for tackling gender inequality? Your recommendation to scientists is to make a conscious effort to make social differentiation of the communities they are working with and factor that into their research, and to communicate better with other scientists and stakeholders. Is there something that developing agencies can also do better?**

Developing agencies, as opposed to research organizations such as ICARDA, work very closely with the community and have the mandate to promote adoption of innovative packages. They can **link our research outputs with development**. They can also serve as a good source of baseline information for research institutes during the initial stages of research, and as providers of feedback after the adoption of the technology. The **linkage** between research and development organizations **should thus be strengthened** to ensure smooth transfer of knowledge and effective adoption of technologies.

### **What can scientists and extension agents do better to work with farmers and rural women to achieve effective transformative changes?**

This is very context-specific. But generally speaking, and based on our research findings, farmers often do not trust researchers and extension agents. I think therefore a lot needs to be done **to gain their trust**. Both extension agents and researchers should make conscious efforts to create **equal opportunities** for all groups of the society, men and women of all ages, to voice their opinions, benefit from awareness raising initiatives, and access proposed technology packages - including institutions that facilitate credit and access to agricultural inputs.

### **What about civil society?**

Civil society are important actors within the **research-to-development continuum**. They are closer to the community, and **local-based** as opposed to development organizations that are project-based. But in this case as well, we have to be gender sensitive and very careful on what kind of civil society we

want to work with. We should take care not to re-enforce inequalities but seek ways that will help us achieve our goals in the most equitable manner.

### **Do you see any changes in how research institutions, donors, and development agencies approach gender equality?**

Yes. Gender sensitivity in research and development is now a core requirement for most donors. The growing focus on **sex-disaggregated outcome level results** is also forcing research and development agencies to plan ahead and make conscious efforts to promote and ensure equitable access to, and utilization of resources. While the “**gender**” agenda is still donor-driven, it is certainly forcing institutions to go outside of their comfort zone and in the process learn the benefits of gender integration in their work.

### **Your research work is centered on rural women. Can you tell us about a time when you could see real change coming from your work?**

I think one of the most direct effects I have seen is in Ethiopia, where we introduced fuel-efficient stoves as part of an ongoing integrated watershed management project. The aim of the biophysical scientists was to restore the ecosystem of the area through improved management of water and land resources.

The stove project was designed based on a **community needs assessment** that involved all groups of the society. Deforestation and the resulting effect on reduced availability of fuel wood to meet household demands was highlighted by the women as a serious challenge - which increased their drudgery, affected their health, and deprived the soil of highly needed fertilizer that came in the form of animal dung, which they have re-purposed as fuel substitute.

Building on previous research findings, the project focused on making a fuel-efficient stoves available and affordable for the women. This was done by training women from the community to produce the stoves locally and by adopting a “stove-for-work” program which allowed households access to the stove in return for contributing family labour for natural resources management related activities within the watershed.

Ensuring the availability and accessibility of the stove resulted in the adoption of the technology by over 800 households in the watershed. The project was also successful in **mobilizing the community** to maintain soil conservation structures, plant over 40,000 trees, reduce demand for fuel wood, and increase application of manure on their farms thereby contributing to improved soil fertility. The project thus brought **direct benefits** to the women that received the stove as well as to the project and the environment.

### **You are a woman scientist studying the role and contribution of women in agriculture. Is there a gender gap within science? Do we need to do more to bring more women in science?**

Yes, there is a gender gap in science. I wouldn't argue that women do better science than men or vice versa. Technically speaking, both men and women can equally deliver - given the same opportunities. However, as it stands now, there are less women involved in agricultural research than men. And so, more should be done to ensure **equitable access** to education and work opportunities, as well as women's engagement in different positions.

### **What is your message for women?**

Women have a lot to contribute! We definitely have a lot to aspire for, and a lot should be done to make sure that there is equity in the system. We certainly have come a long way, but the success achieved is only the tip of the iceberg. There is still a lot more that needs to be done to achieve gender equality at different levels and disciplines.

### **And this can be a message not only for women, but for the world, isn't it?**

Absolutely!

#### **About the author**

Martina Antonucci is the Science Communications and Knowledge Management intern at the CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems.