Briefing Sheet: Gender and Poverty Reduction

University Unit: Office of International Research, Education, and Development (OIRED)
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Abstract:
For over 30 years, Virginia Tech has had a state-funded position to support gender equity in its international development research programs. This reflects Virginia Tech’s commitment to taking gender and women’s issues seriously in research aimed at reducing poverty in the developing world. All major donors now require projects to include gender as an integral part of the project. USAID, which funds most of Virginia Tech’s poverty reduction research, targets half of project beneficiaries to be women. OIRED ensures that gender is a component in all of its externally-funded projects and also hosts a campus-based discussion series aimed at educating the Virginia Tech community on gender and development issues.

Background:
Everything we do in life, whether we are aware of it or not, is gendered. The classical distinction between sex and gender is that while sex refers to male/female bodies, gender refers to learned characteristics inculcated in members of communities according to their particular culture and at a particular time. Together with ethnicity, race, class, age, educational level and other cultural and social attributes, gender shapes the human experience. This is important to consider in poverty reduction efforts in developing countries as access to resources such as land, labor, education, and credit are governed by gender considerations and because women’s priorities and responsibilities often differ from those of men.

In many countries, the “farmer” is thought of as male even though in practice, a majority of women work the land. Moreover, the large share of food production credited to women makes them principal agents in food security and the well-being of rural households. Without ensuring that women participate in research and capacity building efforts, and have access to information, research for development can reinforce the marginalization of women. For example, a focus on men’s crops in agricultural programs may inadvertently create livelihood hardships for women by forcing them out of productive spaces or market niches. Gendered research must make a concerted effort to include women in all steps of the project cycle and take women’s concerns and knowledge into account if it is to help increase agricultural productivity and the sustainable management of natural resources.

What is Virginia Tech doing about this?
Virginia Tech seeks to incorporate gender in all stages of the program cycle: developing objectives, data collection, data analysis, implementation of activities, monitoring and evaluation, and adjustment of project activities. Gender equity is addressed through long and short-term training as well, targeting equal numbers of women and men students for funding and supporting students specifically studying gender. Currently, Virginia Tech is working to integrate gender in global poverty reduction initiatives through the following projects:
  a. Integrated Pest Management Collaborative Research Support Program (IPM CRSP)—Gender Global Theme and the African Food Security Initiative
  b. Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management Collaborate Research Support Program (SANREM CRSP)—Gendered Perspectives for Conservation Agriculture: Local soil knowledge and crop-livestock interaction
  c. Education and Research in Agriculture (ERA) in Senegal
  d. Peanut Collaborative Research Support Program (Peanut CRSP)
  e. Partnership with École Supérieure d’Infotronique d’Haiti (ESIH) in Haiti
Examples

IPM CRSP:

Virginia Tech’s Gender Global Theme in IPM has implemented workshops on Gender and Participative Methodologies in Mali, Uganda, Ecuador, India, and Indonesia. Workshops serve to raise awareness of gender issues among researchers and other stakeholders, provide tools for increasing women’s participation, and for incorporating gender analysis in research. The workshops serve to launch a “Rapid Gender Assessment” (RGA) whereby gender-based constraints and opportunities are identified for improving farmer livelihoods and protecting human and environmental health. In Ecuador, the project team found that older Quechua-speaking indigenous women were essentially excluded—despite their extensive knowledge of plants and pest control—unless translation was provided. In India, the RGA revealed the importance women gave to health issues due to unsafe food and inappropriate use of chemicals. In Mali, it became clear that researchers had to include women’s gardens and not just men’s fields if the “no-host period” approach to combating diseases transmitted by the white fly was to succeed.

SANREM CRSP:

SANREM’s “Gendered Access to Markets: Gendered Networks and Livelihood Alternatives” project compared how gendered networks and coalitions affect the ability of groups to access and control natural resources and to access appropriate markets that capture value for their agricultural products. One finding was that women’s informal networking is a weak but important source of power and requires attention from local leaders to improve its strength. Furthermore, in some sites women marketers and farmers have strong negotiating capacity that is enhanced by the access to information through mechanisms such as radio programs and cell phones. In the current phase of research, the SANREM gender cross-cutting initiative is working in Asia and Latin America looking at how knowledge about soil quality is gendered based on differences in men and women’s practices, access to and control of assets including animal dung and information, and providing incentives (or disincentives) for women’s participation in conservation agriculture.

Peanut CRSP:

In Kamuli District, Uganda, peanuts are very important to local culture and tradition and also an important source of protein, especially for those who cannot afford animal protein, yet carry a hidden health risk: aflatoxins, which cause cancer and other diseases. Working with women’s associations and local women leaders, women farmers were the primary participants in a project that raised their awareness and helped change their post-harvest practices to improve family health and nutrition. By using drawings as well as written entries in journals—and by asking the women to write their recipes and illustrate how peanuts are used in their lives—women were proud to contribute as co-researchers and publish a booklet with their names alongside university scientists. They enthusiastically shared lessons learned with people and places not reached by regular (male dominated) extension services. The booklet, both part of the research and a result of the research, is being widely distributed to women’s organizations in other districts in Uganda and to women’s groups in the neighboring countries of Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda.