

Guidelines for Gender Sensitive Research

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What is a gender sensitive research?

Gender sensitive research is not research on women or on gender relationships; it is research that takes into account gender as a significant variable in environmental and development studies. Men and women have different roles, which impact differently on the environment and development. Moreover, the power relations between men and women can greatly influence the perspective of men and women on environmental and development problems. Thus, gender sensitive research pays attention to the similarities and the differences between men and women's experiences and viewpoints, and gives equal value to each.

What is the problem with traditional research?

Remembering that women constitute the other half of the population is important. Overlooking women's experiences and points of view leads to the wrong conclusions, or at least an incomplete picture of the problem.

In the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, research on the environment and development seldom considers gender as a significant variable. Environmental research often pays little attention to the human and social dimensions. The impact of the population on the environment is examined in relation to 'population activities', but rarely taking into account the gender dimension: 'population' is treated as a homogenous group. Poverty assessment also bases its analysis on household incomes and expenditures; the differential experiences of poverty among household members is rarely analysed. Moreover, only productive paid work is taken into account and valued in economic analysis, while household and unpaid work – mainly performed by women – is overlooked, even if it makes up a large part of food security. Therefore, in traditional research, women's experiences and contributions remain invisible, and, consequently, important aspects of an issue remain undocumented and underestimated and, therefore, may be misunderstood.

Gender has only recently been considered a significant variable in research. However, although it is starting to be recognised in social sciences, it is seldom acknowledged and applied in natural sciences or economics. The choice of research topic, conceptual framework and methodology, analysis framework, and language used in scientific articles tends to reflect male biases and patriarchal values.

Scientists often argue that they do distinguish between men and women and, thus, do not discriminate and are objective. Women researching on women's issues are still often accused of subjectivity, while men who overlook women's perspectives and generalise their findings to the overall population related to their issue are considered objective.

What are the benefits of engendering research?

A better understanding of the problem

Engendering research does not change the scope of the research; it provides new perspectives, raises new questions, and uses new analysis tools to create a more complete picture of the problem. As men and women have different roles and different power, their perspectives on a problem can be quite different. By combining their different experiences and viewpoints, researchers can enhance the comprehension of a problem. Therefore, integrating a gender perspective into research can improve its relevance, coverage, and quality (ADEA Working Group on Higher Education 2006, p. 4). For example, research to identify the impacts of global climate change in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas would be more precise if it integrates in its analysis framework the impacts on human activities, livelihoods, and vulnerability to natural hazards. As men and women have different roles, and as their respective social status and the power relations could impact on their capacity to adapt to climate change, the gender dimension is quite relevant and will enhance the results of the research and increase its usefulness to policymakers.

A study on the value chain of medicinal plants that includes a gender perspective would contribute not only to identifying who is doing what and what needs to be done to increase the producers' benefits, it could also contribute to identifying measures to ensure equitable benefits for producers and processors for both men and women, increasing its impact to reduce poverty.

Methodologies that empower

A gender sensitive research methodology is usually more participatory and can contribute greatly to empowering people, notably women. It helps both men and women concerned by a problem to analyse an issue, understand its causes, and find solutions.

In research aiming to identify the vulnerabilities of mountain people to natural disasters, a gender sensitive participatory approach helps men and women to understand the natural and social factors – beliefs, practices, behaviours – that put them at risk when a natural disaster occur. It can also help them to understand that some social practices may increase women and children’s vulnerabilities and that in order to reduce these risks they may have to modify their behaviour.

A gender sensitive methodology can also contribute to making visible and giving a value to women’s contribution to biodiversity and natural resources management. Eventually, this can contribute to raising awareness about women’s capacities and to boosting their self-confidence.

Sustainable environmental policies

Gender-sensitive research that highlights men’s and women’s perspectives, contributions, and needs can influence policymakers and contribute to gender sensitive policies that address both men’s and women’s needs and, thus, leads to more efficient and effective policies.

A survey on watersheds could contribute to identifying both men’s and women’s needs and to recommendations for watershed policy that ensures equitable access to water resources and equitable participation of men and women in watershed management.

Sustainable mountain development

It is important that research focusing on mountain development and the preservation of natural resources integrates social aspects. Even when research seems more technical, integrating a gender dimension can be very useful, because it brings a social dimension to the problem. Research to identify appropriate solutions to protect biodiversity in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas, for example, requires not only technical and legal examination, but also a look at the social aspects, notably, the gender dimension. If ignored, the solutions identified may be negative for the populations: they could deprive men of income opportunities or increase women’s workload, and, consequently, the populations work against the solutions recommended by the research in order to exploit the resources. However, if the social dimensions of the problem and the gender perspective are properly taken into account, the solutions identified could make the populations more responsible and even play an active role in ensuring the protection and regeneration of natural resources.

Research should also identify the impacts of proposed solutions on men and women; on their workload; on their capacities to access resources; on their social status; and on social and power relations. This analysis could be very helpful when it is time to choose the solutions that will be the most efficient, socially accepted, and, thus, viable.

Guidelines for engendering research

Engendering research means that the gender dimension is mainstreamed into every component of the research: identifying the problem; defining the conceptual and analytical framework; choosing the methodology; analysing the findings; and disseminating the results.

Acknowledge our own bias

Scientific research is not neutral. The position of the researcher, their interests, and values affect how and what research topics are chosen, who they work with, and the perspective and method of research. Even the researcher’s position in society (in term of gender, class, ethnicity, and age) may influence the way in which the research is conducted, how the information is analysed, and how the results are interpreted. Deciding what information is relevant is not always an objective process: local knowledge and information provided by marginalised groups is often given less value than information provided by decision makers, other scientists, or like-minded people.

In order to achieve objectivity, it is important to acknowledge our own bias, preferences, values, and socio-cultural background, and to be constantly aware that these factors could influence the process of the research and its findings.

Define a conceptual framework reflecting men’s and women’s experiences

There are many aspects to take into consideration in the conceptual framework to avoid a male bias and to ensure an inclusive and gender sensitive approach.

Ensure gender sensitive formulation of the research question

The formulation of the research question should integrate a gender perspective: i.e., how are men and women currently affected by the issue and how are they involved in the issue?

Use inclusive definitions of concepts; avoid male bias, prejudices and generalisations

If men and women have different experiences related to the field of research, it is likely that they have different definitions of concepts. Gender sensitive research should pay attention to and integrate different perspectives when defining concepts. It can be useful to try to identify if male and female scientists give the same definition and use the same conceptual framework. Including publications by both male and female scientists in the review of literature could be useful for this purpose.

It is important not to generalise the concepts to the ‘overall population’ if the issue concerns only men or if only men’s perspectives have been documented. For example, men’s

experience of migration may be very different from women's; however, this does not mean that one is more important than the other. Differences in women's migration experiences should be considered important and meaningful and, moreover, women migrants should not be considered only as 'spouses'.

Another problem often faced in research is the use of general concepts that 'hide' gender specific realities. When talking about 'farmers' we often assume that the farmers are men. However, women play an important role in farm production, but their work is different. In some contexts women spend more hours than men in production work, but more importance is given to men's role as owners and income generators.

Hypotheses, analytical frameworks, and models must be based on reality, not on assumptions about gender roles, capacities, and cultural values. Double standards, and overrating or underrating activities related to men or women must be avoided including:

- prejudices about the capacities of men or women, or about which activities are better suited to one or another
- placing more value on men's contribution compared to women's in the same field
- placing more value on women's work in the household, while neglecting the value of women's work outside the household

It is also important to recognise the diversity of women's and men's experiences: do not judge who is a 'real' woman and who is most representative of men's role according to your own values.

Develop a gender sensitive methodology

Questioning the conventional approach to research is important. The usual distant and hierarchical position of researchers has been criticised in recent years, because it often eliminates a wide range of knowledge and raises ethical issues about who is benefiting from the results of the research, and how and for what purpose the results are used. A gender sensitive methodology not only takes into account gender differences in the conceptual and analytical framework, it also uses methods and tools that are participatory, respectful, and accountable.

Use qualitative tools to capture people's perspectives and diversity of viewpoints

If quantitative tools are useful for identifying 'what' and 'how many', qualitative tools are interesting because they help us to understand 'how' and 'why'. They give a voice to people, even for issues that seem very technical, recognising that both men and women from any socioeconomic background have valuable experiences and knowledge.

Ensure equitable representation and participation of men and women

How information is collected and analysed and who is collecting it is important because it influences the quality, authenticity, and value of the information itself.

Unless the research is specifically focused on men's experience (e.g., men's migration; men's vulnerability to flash flood; men's role in natural resources management), making sure that women are equitably represented in the sample population is essential.

It is important to include female scientists in the research team as it facilitates the participation of women, especially in a conservative context. It is also useful to have the perspective of female scientists in the analysis process. It could be very challenging to involve women if the research involves interviews and consultations with government representatives, senior managers, technicians, engineers, or natural scientists, as there are still very few women working in these areas and at these levels in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. An additional effort must be made to identify women working in the field of research. If there are none, it could be useful to expand the sample to include some women's organisations or institutions dedicated to women in order to capture women's perspectives and experiences. The very limited number of women in the research field should be considered significant information to be considered and reported.

Finally, it is important to ensure the qualification of the research team to conduct gender analysis.

Use gender sensitive research tools

It is important to use research's tools that are not seen as threatening or embarrassing for women or men. It can be very challenging for some women to talk about some issues in front of men from their family or community, or men from outside. Some places or times may be convenient for men, but not for women; this will contribute to the exclusion of women. Written materials are not appropriate when working with illiterate or people with a low-level of education – and few women are well educated in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas – and can place a barrier between the researchers and the sample population.

In some contexts women have very few opportunities to express their ideas; consequently their knowledge and opinions are often neglected, even by themselves. They are not used to talking in public or to being consulted. Thus, it is important to show interest in their roles and views, to value their experiences, and to have patience.

Even if women and men have different roles and experiences, it is important to give them the opportunity to present their points of view on the same subject and pay attention to the similarities and the differences. Often

researchers ask different questions to men and women, assuming that they have different levels of interest in the topic. For example, women and men have different roles in the utilisation and management of water; hence, it is often assumed that women are only interested in water for household needs, while men are mainly interested in the use of water for productivity. However, women could also have a strong interest in the utilisation of water for agricultural production, notably for family gardens, as they also participate in farm production and in raising livestock.

Take gender perspective into account in analysis and interpretation

Use and produce gender disaggregated data and conduct a gender analysis

Gender sensitive research uses and produces gender disaggregated data and gender analysis. Documenting differences based on gender does not provide comprehension of gender issues, or why there are differences, inequities, or inequalities. A gender analysis should explain the differences in experiences, viewpoints, and impacts related to gender roles and power relationships.

It is particularly important not to assume the universality of gender roles and to avoid transforming statistical differences into innate differences (Eichler & Lapointe 1985, p 9). Gender roles and power relations between men and women are not 'natural' or due to the intrinsic 'nature' of men or women; they are constructed in a particular socioeconomic and cultural context. This is why the contextualisation of the research is important: it should indicate where the research was conducted; who was involved; who is concerned with the topic; what are the beliefs and practices related to it, and so forth.

A gender analysis should provide information about how men and women are related to, or affected by, the subject of the research. It should take into account the following factors:

- the division of labour, roles, and responsibilities between men and women: who is doing what and what is the link with the research's topic
- women and men's access to and control over resources: natural resources, financial resources, information, decision making processes
- the power relations in the household, community, society, workplace, and so forth
- the legal and social status of men and women

These factors are likely to influence how men and women relate to the problem.

Anticipate impacts of new policies or practices on men and women

Gender sensitive research should also identify the impacts of new practices or policies on men and women; who will benefit from these; who will be disadvantaged; and the impacts on men and women's activities and relationships.

Reporting the findings

Highlight the gender dimension

The reporting process should highlight the gender dimension of the research topic. It should make visible gender differences: different roles, different involvements, different experiences, different opinions, and different needs. It should also provide as much visibility to women's contributions and experiences as men's.

Using gender sensitive language in the research report

An effective way to highlight the gender dimension of the research's topic is to use gender sensitive language. Language itself is not neutral and, in most cultures, has largely been forged by men and, therefore, reflects the values of patriarchal society.

Generic terms should be used to translate generic situations and gender specific terms to make visible men's or women's roles and perspectives. For example, if we are talking about men's role in rangeland activities, it is better to specify that we are talking about 'male herders'. If you use the term 'herders' to talk about men's work only, you contribute to hiding women's role as herders – a role that might be quite different to men's.

Advocating for gender sensitive practices

If the research has been gender sensitive, the findings should also highlight the gender dimension of the topic. The findings could have a great impact on policies and, therefore, should propose equity measures, and promote equality and social inclusion.



Photo: Tahweed Gul

Checklist for gender sensitive research

1. Acknowledge our own bias
2. Identify the human and social components of the research object
3. Define a conceptual framework reflecting men's and women's experiences
4. Avoid male bias, prejudices and double standards
5. Develop a gender sensitive methodology
6. Build a gender balanced research team
7. Choose a gender balanced sample
8. Give value to both men's and women's experiences
9. Use and produce gender disaggregated data
10. Conduct a gender analysis
11. Anticipate impacts of new policies or practices on men and women
12. Use gender sensitive language in the research report

Additional reading

ADEA Working Group on Higher Education/Association of Africa Universities. (2006) Module 5 [Research and Gender Sensitive Research Methods \(.pdf 590 KB\)](#). 2006. 11 pages. Available at: http://www.adeanet.org/publications/en_pubs_wghe.html

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Photo: Robert Zomer