Gender and Indigenous Knowledge: Experiences from Southwest China

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Rethinking Gender and Indigenous Knowledge

- Ignoring the power relationship related to gender, and wanting to record and use women’s indigenous knowledge for conservation of the environment and sustainable development,

- The pervasive frame of gendered knowledge is dominated by the gender role approach which considers different roles and responsibilities related to different areas of knowledge.

- It fails to take into account the gender power dynamic in the process of knowledge construction.
The paper explores the experiences from the Southwest of China

The research use the second hand materials, to interview some staffs from one of the NGO in Yunnan which is dealing with the indigenous knowledge of ethnic groups in China, its practice is representative of the real situation of this area in China today.
How it deals with gender through looking at the NGO’s recognition of gender,

How it is reflected in their staff’s thinking and their documents.

My research reveals that there is an imprint of WED thought in the ideology of the NGO, both in terms of its documents or the expression of the staff.
Have recognized the importance of strengthening women’s self-esteem and raising their voice in the community through encouraging women’s participation in the program.

Do not have any strategies to deal with unequal gender power relations in their programs.
They have two kinds of opinion which prevent them from exploring more strategies related to gender in their programs:

- Other issues of inequality as more important than gender such as the inequality between nations in terms of resource utilization.

- Only recognize that women are of an equal gender; they do not have clear strategies to integrate gender into their research or generation of indigenous knowledge process.
some lessons from program implementation in term of gender and indigenous knowledge

- Gender division of labour is recognised in practice, do not pay more attention to gender power relations operated in indigenous knowledge.
- Women are not seen to have the authority to legitimate their knowledge by communities as men do.
- That makes women’s knowledge more invaluable, but also more invisible and marginal in practice of the program.
The decision-making process in the program as a main context to show the power dynamic related to gender. Men’s domination in the process of decision-making is normal and women are marginalised, and in reality there is little utilization of women’s knowledge.

In the new technology extension and experience process, women’s absence is not as a result of women’s conservatism in regard to new technology as some technical staff thinks.
Articulate the power relationship between men and women related to their knowledge. Scrutinize knowledge sharing or exchange between them.

The cooperation between men and women in daily life, and as a result, the knowledge which is generated jointly in the process of communication, negotiation, and discussion cannot always be neatly categorised as men’s and women’s knowledge.
Sharing knowledge between man and women is not equal, there is someone still to be considered more knowledgeable than others. So I might add that the ideology about whose knowledge is more authoritative, and the social control process—decision making, both of them maintain men’s dominant situation and enable women’s knowledge to be extracted through the process of the ‘sharing’. It is a way which legitimates and strengthens men’s dominant situation through the sharing process.
Indigenous knowledge is holistic and banded with the local cultural and social context which is rooted in the political, religious and historical background including the spiritual and material world. It reflects social relationships and the process of configuration. It cannot escape the specific society’s norms, values and ideology. Understanding the process of the knowledge structure reflects these social relations, so we need to scrutinise different institutions which are related to different contexts of knowledge, such as household, communities, marketing and state-policy making.
• Indigenous knowledge is gendered in different ways which include the areas of knowledge because men and women do different things related to their responsibilities and roles;

• The technical opinions which are rooted in their social and political status and experience;

• The ways in which men and women express their knowledge.

• And who has the authority to legitimate and represent local knowledge regarding gender;

• How sharing or negotiating knowledge between the women and men.

• But I believe this is not conclusive because there is so little research relating gender and indigenous knowledge, it is important to carve out more new roads in practice.
some important contexts which relate the power dynamic decision-making scenes

-- In household knowledge bargaining between men and women

-- Community resource management committee meetings

-- Policy making process etc.
The limited information did not reveal clearly in many ways

-- Is there any negotiation between men’s and women’s knowledge? And how?

-- Whose criteria are to be adopted, and why?

-- When gendered knowledge meets different knowledge from the outside, such as in the new technology extension process, why is men’s knowledge easier to integrate in the process of experiments than that of women?

-- So there are many questions which need more exploration.
Suggests strongly

- It is necessary to advocate and explore more about how gender power relations operate in the indigenous knowledge area, especially in Southwest of China in theory or practice.

- The two areas are essential and significant;
  -- One is using social relations in terms of gender to research gender power relations at different institutional levels, which is the comprehensive way to reveal the relation between gender and indigenous knowledge.
  -- Another is to focus on the process of indigenous knowledge transmission, exchange and utilization, to see how the gender power dynamic works inside.

- Those two research foci will contribute in the process of utilization of indigenous knowledge to have clearer strategies to bring about effective conservation of the environment and change unequal gender power relationships.