

## **CAN WE GENERATE SPACES FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER NORMS THROUGH EXTENSION SERVICES?**



*Lilian and Subash reflect on questions concerning women’s empowerment interventions, based on scientific results and field experiences they gained while working in South Asia and South-East Asia. Their concern is that an approach of targeting women in capacity training while ignoring the prevalent gender discriminating norms could increase workload, challenges, and risks for participating women. Instead, they suggest a participative approach where extension services can create spaces and co-create opportunities for transforming gender norms toward greater equality.*



**Female extension worker in conversation with men farmers at Aurangabad**

### **CONTEXT**

Before diving into the topic, we've got an interesting riddle for you. We invite you to take a moment to think about it and see if you can crack it!

*A father and a son meet with a horrible car crash that kills the dad. The son is rushed to the hospital; just as he's about to go under the knife, the surgeon says, "I can't operate – that boy is my son!"*

Who is the doctor? If your answer is anything other than 'mother', you are not alone. A survey by Wapman and Belle (2014) shows that ~85% of school and college student respondents gave another answer than 'mother'. The results were the same for an alternate version of the riddle:

*A mother is killed, her daughter sent to the hospital, and a nurse declines to attend to the patient because "That girl is my daughter".*

Only a few people guessed that the nurse might be the child's father.

This illustrates how deeply gendered biases are ingrained into the ways in which we analyse, evaluate and act in social situations. However, such gender biases, whether intentional or unintentional, can lead to social discrimination. Let's look at how important it is to expose and transform discriminating gender biases in our efforts to achieve greater gender equality.

## GENDER IN THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) promotes gender equality, leading to several individual and community efforts (Surendran Padmaja et al. 2023b). However, these efforts are manifested and operate differently based on the context. Let us give you one example: In the Figure below, you can see a photo of a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) that was carried out as part of the project assessing the impact of a community-based seed producer group in the mid-hills of Nepal. The programme had a gender component and was promoting women to be members of the seed producer group that develops and promotes the production of maize seeds (<https://hmrp.cimmyt.org/approaches-activities/overview-2/community-based-seed-production-cbsp/>).



**Focus group discussion with seed producer groups in Nepal. What do you see in the picture? Why do you think women are sitting in the back? Should I have made them a part of the circle?**

As you can see, in the photo the men are sitting in a closed circle, and the women are sitting outside the circle. Aiming for inclusion in the discussion, we as facilitators, asked the women to join the circle, but they hesitated. Moreover, they were reluctant to engage in such mixed FGDs on the whole. If we look for the reason, we realise that this is an example of how gender discrimination is manifested and perpetuated through norms, behavior, and practices.

### The Power of Norms

Norms are like the silent referees of society, dictating the dos and don'ts of our everyday interactions. They hold immense power over our behavior, steering us in certain directions even when we might prefer to take a different route. Picture this: you might not agree with every rule in the book, but you still toe the line because you crave that nod of approval from your peers and dread the potential eyebrow raises or even threats if you deviate too far from the norm. Now, let's zoom onto a specific subset of these societal rules: gender norms. They're like the unwritten script of how women are supposed to act and conduct themselves based on their gender identity or how others perceive them. Let's consider such questions as: Who gets to own the farm? Who calls the shots in agricultural decisions? and more such. The automatic answers to these questions show that these norms play a significant role in shaping our lives, whether we realise it or not.

### EMPOWERING WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE: CURRENT DISCOURSE IN GENDER EMPOWERMENT

Current gender empowerment efforts are predominantly women-centric (Surendran-Padmaja et al. 2023b). In such women-centric interventions, women beneficiaries are identified and either trained or provided with inputs such as seeds, machinery, etc. These interventions aim to result in empowerment, and often, they result in empowerment but with challenges and power struggles between spouses, family, and community. And let's not forget the behind-the-scenes power plays happening within households. It's like a chess game, with each move determining who holds the upper hand in decision-making and resource allocation. Gender norms and stereotypes further complicate things, putting up roadblocks for young women trying to make their mark in agriculture. It is important to note that women farmers are often experts and hold a very rich knowledge in important agricultural areas. Assumptions that they are unable to empower themselves due to a lack in skills or knowledge might foster discriminating gender biases. Besides in many cultures, gender concepts and norms are very complex and often much more fluid than simplified binary concepts of man and woman. However, if we exclude biological men from woman centric interventions, we might manifest a strict conceptual division of men and women. In other situations, however it might generate a save space for women. Therefore, we need to be very attentive to the specific cultural context and the needs of women.



Current predominant discourse in gender development

### Importance of Transforming Gender Norms

Gender inequality is intricately tied to social norms, playing a crucial role in shaping and perpetuating disparities between genders. Gender norms, deeply embedded in society, are significant barriers to achieving gender equality. Nevertheless, it is possible to bring about change by challenging these norms and thereby fostering more equitable societies. For a transformative journey, it is essential to first understand the existing norms and how they influence behaviors and attitudes. Embracing gender

transformative approaches can be instrumental in dismantling harmful norms and promoting positive change. Engaging with the community is also pivotal in driving these efforts forward, as collective action and collaboration are key to creating a more inclusive and equitable future.

## HOW TO CHANGE NORMS

Based on the discussion above, aiming for a change or transformation of discriminating gender norms would be desirable to achieve greater equality and empowerment for women. But is it even possible as an extension actor, for example, to initiate these changes, and is it even desirable? As we have highlighted above, top-down approaches are even exposing women to risks; furthermore, assuming that we cannot, and should not, try to change either people or norms in a top-down approach, we are suggesting that one can only open up spaces in which gender norms are renegotiated among participants and individuals. They can then experience for themselves the new roles that are opening for determining gender roles, concepts, and norms.

Below, we offer some suggestions deriving from the field experiences of Lilian.

### **Farmer to farmer teaching:**

Farmer-to-farmer teaching is an approach in which farmers share their knowledge and experiences with others, acting as experts on sustainable practices. This approach can provide a valuable opportunity for women farmers to empower themselves in a new role as experts and for their peers to acknowledge them in this capacity. It could be even more effective if female farmers were compensated for their training services. As an extension actor, one could invite and facilitate farmer-to-farmer training as an integral part of a project, which could include a budget for farmer-teacher salaries in the project proposal. In our project villages, some female farmers reported reduced violence in their households due to being perceived as agricultural experts.

### **Businesswomen groups:**

This means basically that women farmers are forming a business group to produce and sell certain local products. Let me share with you one example from Ghana: products/beans of the so-called miracle tree 'African Locust' has cultural significance and are of multidimensional value for women in the Dagomba culture (North Ghana). Therefore, a women's group has established a business by producing Dawadawa spices and teas for generating income but also to provide access to this important product for other women (Lelea et al. 2022). If you are interested in this example, we would like to invite you to watch this video in which the group members present their African Locust Bean business: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=901JV1gv\\_Gw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=901JV1gv_Gw)

### **Participatory radio (Ghana):**

In participatory radio sessions farmers can share their knowledge and ideas or promote their products among other farmers by streaming them on appreciated local radio stations. This also is a potential space in which women farmers can experience themselves in the role of experts and open channels to share gendered ideas or initiatives. For example, we organised participatory radio sessions with women's business groups in Ghana in which they shared their experiences with Dawadawa tree and spice products. The Dawadawa products are of multidimensional value to women of the Dawamba culture, but the Dawadawa tree is threatened by a lack of conservation measures as its importance is not understood by men. The radio sessions gave opportunities for these women's groups to talk about the value of these trees and their products, and to also encourage other women to form groups and do business with these very healthy spices. They also provided information to other women on where to buy these spices and thus promoted their products as well.



Participatory radio session with indigenous farmers in Cambodia.

**Women’s savings groups:**

Savings groups, more so than other community-based groups, support women to grow their financial resources and enable them to take loans from this group and invest further. Women’s participation in savings groups influence their public participation and social acceptance. Members of one women’s saving group in Cambodia, for example, spent money on important assets for the community, such as water wells, boats to cross the river, and construction of bridges.

**Farmer Field School:**

Farmer Field School (FFS) is a participatory educational approach that brings together a group of small-scale food producers to solve production problems through sustainable agriculture (FAO 2024). In many parts of the world unsustainable farming is increasing overall farmer vulnerability to poverty, especially for female farmers, resulting in multidimensional destitution, exposing them to risks. Studies show that female farmers are more vulnerable to the risks of food insecurity compared to male farmers.



Ferry constructed with funds from the women’s saving group.

Considering the many socio-ecological dimensions of agricultural systems that are interwoven with gender aspects, we would like to argue that it is crucial for gender sensitivity to always be an integral part of farmer field school facilitation. How can this be achieved? As a facilitator, it is essential to pay attention to the needs, interests, and expertise of female farmers and ensure that their input is valued. This also includes recognizing one's gender bias and continually reflecting on how it influences one's thoughts. Basically, it means 'to listen attentively instead of presuming'. A practical approach could be to collaborate with a local woman in the facilitation process, as she can bring valuable insights into local culture and norms, enabling the implementation of more gender-sensitive activities.

**Here are a few more practical tips which worked well in Cambodia:**

- Organising women farmers only discussion groups;
- Identifying barriers to participation, for example, childcare responsibilities for women, and finding solutions, such as providing a person who will take care of the children for participating mothers during Farmer Field School Sessions;
- Identifying risks women perceive associated with these activities and finding solutions to minimize these risks during Farmer Field School sessions. For example, risks associated with travelling can be dealt with by organizing women's travel groups.

It is crucial to adopt a participatory approach to identify the topics for farmer field school that are relevant for female farmers. We tried to facilitate such a participatory approach by developing a community engagement process in Cambodia. If you are interested, you could watch this video which showcases our community engagement process:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfFK27CT2nM>

During my collaboration with some indigenous female farmers, we identified the conservation of traditional rice varieties as an important topic. In Cambodia, women traditionally hold the responsibility and expertise in this area, giving them decision-making power and contributing to socio-ecological resilience against challenges such as climate change and food insecurity. By following best practices to regenerate soil fertility and overcoming heat deterioration caused by climate change, women farmers are able to conserve these important rice varieties and maintain their traditionally important role as seed preservers. Again, if you are interested in more information, you can watch a video about the establishment of locally adapted rice storage.

<https://youtu.be/i4ERFgT2GA4>

## **REFLECTIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS**

To make meaningful contribution towards achieving greater gender equality, it's important to take into account the existing gender norms and the need for a transformation process towards more equality. However, it's important to be cautious about adopting a top-down approach that could potentially expose women in cooperatives to risks, as it may conflict with existing gender norms.

It is crucial to recognize that changing gender norms is about changing power dynamics and thus creates resistance. Therefore, those with less power must be supported in their empowerment to demand change. Projects and programmes must respond to these needs and demands of participating women, rather than assuming a top-down approach. One way to achieve this is by creating spaces where women can renegotiate discriminatory gender norms, empower themselves, and experience new roles and self-concepts. All participants should have an opportunity to be a part of this process so that gender norms can be transformed into a collective experience within, for example, a village community. Of course, these remain experiences of individuals or individual communities and therefore it is difficult to say that these spaces are transforming gender norms in society. However,

we would like to think that these are contributions to induce a transformation process that can sow the seeds of change towards greater gender equality.

**Note:** This blog is based on a presentation by Subash at an ATSAF academy seminar titled 'Transforming gender norms: Pathways to gender equality in agriculture'. The whole seminar is available on: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DY7MAJ\\_rOPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DY7MAJ_rOPQ)

Also on Lilian's presentation in the ZEF Gender Group - titled 'Diving into the complexity of integrating gender sensitivity into fieldwork: Experiences and reflections from Cambodia' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iAZ20-6WVE>).

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*Lilian (Beck) has been working in the field of Agroecology for the past six years with organizations like Uni Kassel, FiBL, FAO, ICRAF, and CIAT, mostly in Cambodia and with stakeholders on the African continent. She holds a Master degree in Agroecology from the Swedish University of Agriculture and is currently conducting her Ph.D. project on "Inter- Organizational learning activities to boost agroforestry dissemination "at the University of Hohenheim and ICRAF. Her research focuses on transdisciplinary action research, participatory videomaking, indigenous cultures, agro-ethnology, agroecology, agroforestry, gender, climate-smart agriculture, communication, and extension. [lilianmarleen.beck@uni-hohenheim.de](mailto:lilianmarleen.beck@uni-hohenheim.de)*

*Subash Surendran-Padmaja is a PhD student at the Center for Development Research (ZEF), University of Bonn, Germany. He is a recipient of the ATSAF academy fellowship and currently collaborating with the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) for his PhD work. He is also a Scientist (Agricultural Economics) at ICAR-National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research (NIAP), New Delhi, India. His research areas of interest are agricultural policy, impact assessment of agricultural technologies, behavioral and institutional economics. [subashspar@gmail.com](mailto:subashspar@gmail.com)*

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**AESA Secretariat: Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP),  
Road No 10, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India  
[www.aesanetwork.org](http://www.aesanetwork.org)      Email: [aesanetwork@gmail.com](mailto:aesanetwork@gmail.com)**