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Transforming gender relations: Key to positive development outcomes in aquatic agricultural systems

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Introduction

The CGIAR Research Program on Aquatic Agricultural Systems (AAS) is committed to improving the food security and wellbeing of poor people who depend on freshwater and coastal ecosystems for their livelihoods. It aims to reach an estimated 50 million people in Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands and Zambia.

AAS is particularly concerned with enhancing the equity of the social, economic and political structures that influence the livelihoods of poor households dependent on aquatic agricultural systems. This concern stems from how agricultural development efforts have been quite successful in improving the *availability* of resources and technologies in developing countries, but have been less successful in overcoming or even recognizing the social constraints that make it difficult for marginalized groups, including most women, to use the resources and technologies to their own and the sector's benefit. This blind spot not only means that agricultural innovations often fail to achieve lasting material advantages for the poor and marginalized, but also may reinforce existing disadvantages. Overcoming this challenge requires that donors, agricultural research institutes and state and non-state development agencies give equal weight to creating and sustaining equitable social environments for developing and disseminating new technologies. This balance is expected to create the conditions under which more people, and particularly those in marginalized groups, have greater opportunities to participate in and benefit from agricultural development.

Since the AAS has identified systemic inequalities as key factors that stymie agricultural development, this raises questions about where and how social issues, and particularly gender relations, have been successfully integrated into agricultural development in the past. The last 40 years have seen some progress with regard to including gender concerns in agricultural interventions. However, much of this progress has been around getting gender on the agenda of development and funding agencies. While important, this step by itself has not been sufficient to create sustained social and economic change, in large part because of the way many mainstream development agencies have adopted simplified understandings of gender and gender inequality. More attention now needs to be given to how gender is conceptualized and integrated in order to achieve lasting poverty reduction and food security outcomes where women also benefit.¹

This brief makes the case that a more political and transformative approach to integrating gender in agricultural research and programming is needed in order to respond to the challenges of poverty and food insecurity. While progress has been made through the inclusion of gender on the agenda of agricultural research and development organizations, these efforts tend to focus on closing gaps between women and men in access to and control over resources, technologies and markets. The persistence of gender inequality in the face of these technical approaches demonstrates the need to rethink how agricultural researchers and practitioners conceptualize gender, portray both women and men and value what women and men do, have and know.

The brief describes AAS' current thinking on the core components of a gender transformative approach (GTA). It does so both to spark debate and dialogue that advance thinking on the approach, as well as to enable others to operationalize and test

the approach in different contexts, thereby contributing to learning about the conditions under which GTA does and does not foster qualitatively better and more lasting development outcomes. Such debate and analysis are necessary if we are to be in a position to:

1. identify how to foster the social changes necessary to lock in desired improvements in food security, wellbeing and livelihood security;
2. build an evidence base that supports the movement of GTAs into the mainstream of agricultural research and practice.

The need for a new approach to gender integration in agricultural research and practice

Decades of research have produced considerable evidence of 'gender gaps' in access resources, markets, business services between women and men engaged in agriculture,² and in aquatic agriculture systems specifically.³ Examples include early work related to gender differences in agriculture, such as Boserup's classic text (1970) documenting women's roles in African agriculture, and often-cited empirical work by Udry (1996), such as Saito et al. (1994) and Jones (1986), quantifying differences between women and men in agricultural inputs and in some cases estimating the productivity gains from their reversal. Recent additions to this literature include compilations such as the FAO's *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–2011*; the *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook* (2009); and multiple recent studies on gender and asset rights testing new methods for collecting intra-household asset data and documenting gender gaps.⁴

Box 1. The 'stickiness' of gender inequalities.

The 'stickiness' of gender inequalities is a global challenge. The World Bank's 2012 World Development Report notes that many gender inequalities persist because they have complex overlapping causes and are entrenched in gender roles and social norms.

Progress on addressing gender inequality in Bangladesh exemplifies this complexity. While there has been considerable progress over the last few decades in improving women's relative status (World Bank 2008; Nazneen et al. 2011), much of this progress has occurred in the health and education sectors, and not in areas requiring redistributions of resources and/or decision-making power. Women's paid labor force participation remains low, even for South Asian standards, and wage inequalities persist (USAID 2010; World Bank 2008). Women have limited domestic and community decision-making roles (World Bank 2008; HKI 2011), even with the expectation that widespread access to microcredit would shift these patterns.

There is consensus that 'second generation challenges' involving institutional and cultural change remain in Bangladesh (World Bank 2008; Nazneen et al. 2011). Tackling these challenges requires approaches that go beyond instrumentalist interventions, which avoid dealing with 'the more structural aspects of women's position and power' (Nazneen et al. 2011: 34).

¹ Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson 2008; Chant and Sweetman 2012.

² Saito et al. 1994; World Bank 2001; FAO 2010; Jones 1986; Udry 1996.

³ Weeretunge-Starkloff and Pant 2011; WB/FAO/IFAD 2009; Medard 2005; Kusakabe et al. 2006; Tindall and Holvoet 2008; Porter 2006; Okali and Holvoet 2007.

⁴ See, for example, work on assets rights by the International Center for Research on Women (www.icrw.org), IFPRI (www.ifpri.org) and the In Her Name: Measuring the Gender Asset Gap project (<http://genderassetgap.iimb.ernet.in/>).

These studies and documents contribute significantly to the evidence base for why gender matters to agricultural development. In this way they have helped to influence mainstream development organizations' willingness to invest in gender equality in agriculture. However, they also underlie an approach to gender integration and an understanding of gender that simplify a complex problem.⁵ This body of evidence has focused attention on closing gender gaps as a development goal in itself based on the understanding that doing so could lead to productivity gains that would directly benefit women and families. While useful, efforts which focus only on reducing the identified differences – the visible symptoms of gender inequality – miss both identifying and addressing the underlying factors that caused the differences in the first place.⁶

Research and practice that aim to identify and reduce gender differences in access to technologies, markets or resources are gender-responsive, in that they understand and respond to the specific needs and interests of women and men. They are therefore an improvement over policies, research and programs that focus on 'farmers', 'communities', or 'households' without understanding the differences in experiences and outcomes these aggregations mask. However, both the persistent evidence of gender differences in resources after decades of development research and action (see Box 1), and conceptual developments regarding the social embeddedness of agriculture and gender, raise questions about the effectiveness of gender-responsive approaches for the task at hand.

There is growing acknowledgement among some scholars and practitioners that both agriculture and gender are embedded in how societies and their institutions function⁷ In the case of agriculture – whether the farming of crops or fish or the rearing of livestock – this involves acknowledging that while the sector is technical in nature, it is much more complex than this, and technical innovations and technologies alone will not improve the sector's outcomes. People practice agriculture at particular times and places. Therefore, the social relations that influence the positions, attitudes and opportunities of the people who engage in agriculture – e.g. women and men, wealthy and poor, landowners and landless – shape agricultural practices, knowledge and outcomes.⁸ For example, intra-household decision-making power related to assets, land, labor and the payment received for work influence the motivations for women, men and/or youth to participate in agricultural development programs or to adopt new technologies in very different ways. Not incorporating an understanding of agriculture as a social as well as a technical practice into agricultural research and development can lead to a range of unintended consequences, from the non-adoption of new technologies to the decreased welfare of program participants.

Understandings of gender have advanced from those that identify it as a property of individual people to those that conceive it as a socially constructed stratification system linked to the norms and values of a particular society at a specific point in time.⁹ The latter understanding focuses attention on changing how society works in order to sustainably enhance gender equality while the former focuses primarily on improving individual access while leaving the social conditions that enable

gender inequality untouched. Gender integration in agricultural research and practice is most heavily influenced by understandings of gender as a characteristic of individuals. This understanding supports the use of gender as an empirical category in, for example, comparative analysis of men's and women's experiences, and the addition of women to programs operating within existing social and economic structures.¹⁰ It underlies the women in development (WID) approach, and focuses analysis on identifying and closing gender gaps. The application of this simple concept of gender is a stumbling block to advancing the quality of gender analysis within agriculture research and practice.¹¹ While it might be easily understood and readily applied, it dilutes the conceptual and analytical complexity of gender. It focuses action on individuals and the visible symptoms of inequality, but not on transforming how society works so that more people have more and better quality livelihood choices.

Box 2. Zambian proverbs and the normalization of gender inequality.

The World Bank's Zambia Gender Assessment (Milimo et al. 2004) compiled local language sayings that demonstrate quite starkly the depth at which gender inequalities permeate society. Some examples include:

<i>Akaume takachepa</i> *	A male is never young or small
<i>Bakaintu tabajisi mitwe</i> ^	Women do not have brains
<i>Sina musali ki mutu?</i> #	Is a woman/girl a human being?
<i>Bana basimbi ndubono</i> ^	Daughters are wealth
<i>Kwapa tacila kubeya</i> *	The armpit (representing a woman) can never be higher than the shoulder (the man)

* Bemba language; ^ Tonga language; # Lozi language

By not viewing gender as part of how society works, mainstream agricultural research and practice accept the 'social status quo' without questioning whether and how existing norms, attitudes and distributions of power frame the opportunities and outcomes of women and men to create inequalities. Therefore, these approaches can offer no assurance that women will be able to take advantage of or benefit from new opportunities or technologies because society's understandings of what is acceptable for women and men to be, do, own and control may continue to impose barriers.

Box 2 demonstrates how deeply engrained and normalized understandings of gender can become in society. It is unlikely that mainstream accommodating approaches to gender integration in agriculture can do much on their own to overcome these deeply held beliefs. New approaches are needed, which incorporate a more complex understanding of gender and gender inequality, and which act to address both the social causes and material consequences of inequality, in order to create lasting positive changes in agricultural development outcomes.

⁵ Okali 2011a, 2011b, 2012; O'Laughlin 2008.

⁶ Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson 2008; Chant and Sweetman 2012.

⁷ Fairhead and Leach 2005; Risman 2004; Kabeer 1994; Cornwall and Edwards 2010; Okali 2011a, 2011b, 2012.

⁸ Fairhead and Leach 2005.

⁹ Risman 2004; Martin 2004.

¹⁰ Peterson 2005.

¹¹ Okali 2012.

A gender transformative approach to agricultural research in development

The AAS conceptualizes gender as a social construct that infuses all aspects of daily life. This means gender (and other intersecting forms of social difference such as ethnicity or class) affects: how women and men conceive of themselves and their capabilities; how women and men interact within the framework of social expectations; and how opportunities are structured and resources are distributed within institutions like the market and the state.

To address gender inequality within agriculture it is therefore essential to invest in rigorous social analysis that explores all of these dimensions through participatory and collaborative

processes. Such analysis will provide the depth of understanding of how social norms, values and power relations shape and are shaped by women's and men's understandings of their roles and capacities; societal expectations of what is appropriate for women and men to be and do in the sector; and how these expectations and differences are institutionalized in the way the market, family, community and state work. This analysis questions the social *status quo*, and highlights where inconsistencies between norms and practices may provide openings for social change. The results of the analysis will inform the design and testing of interventions that both transform the social environment to broaden the range and quality of life choices open to poor rural women and men, and improve material conditions.

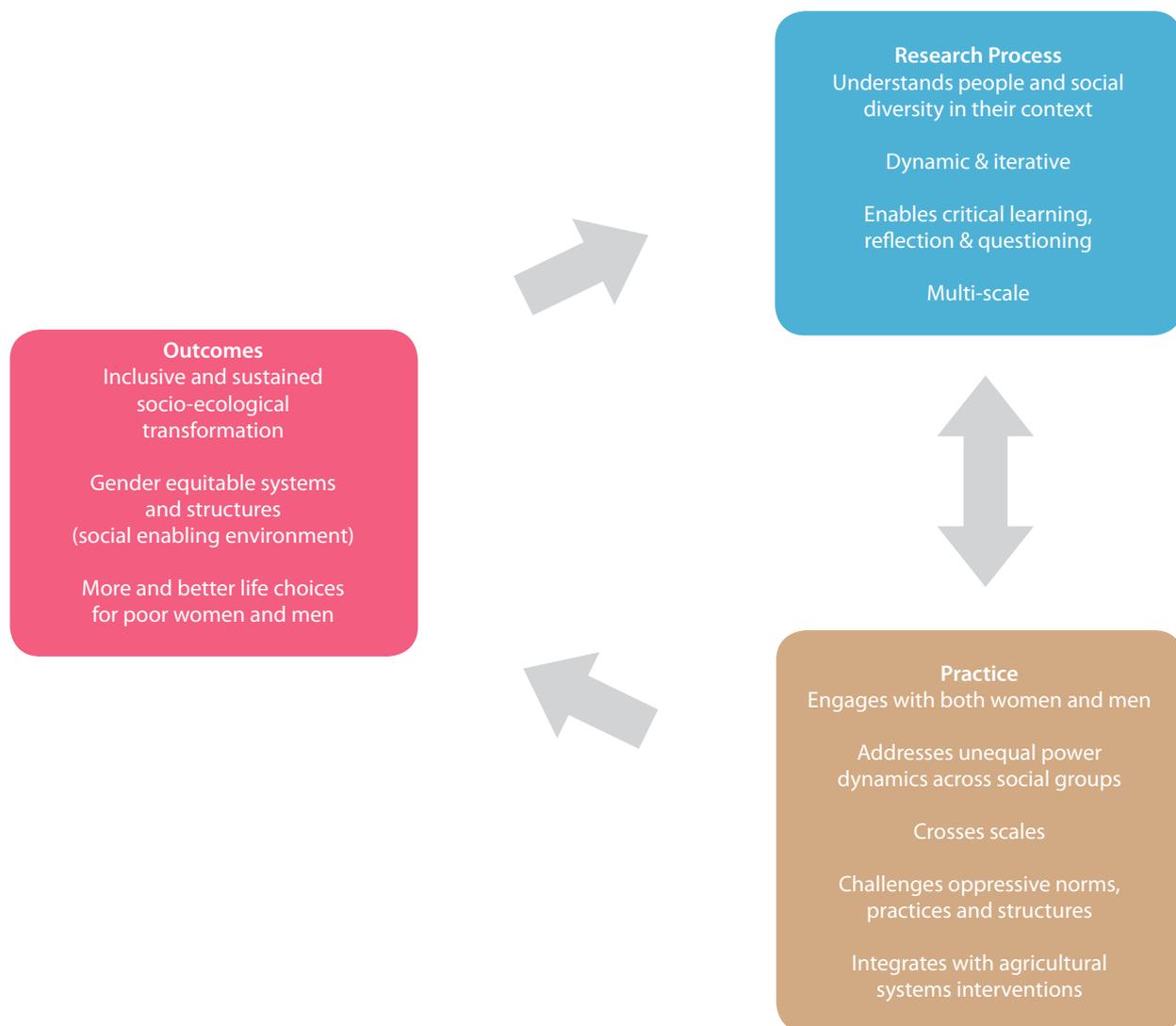


Figure 1. Characteristic of a gender transformative approach to agricultural RnD.

A GTA, therefore, purposefully puts the social context at the center of analysis. It contends that without 'extending the horizons of possibility, of what people imagine themselves being able to be and do'¹² agricultural development can only progress so far. Without examining how gender norms, practices and power relations cause unequal access to agricultural resources, markets and technologies, and working with both men and women to address gender inequality, agricultural research and practice will not address the full complexity of the challenges facing us, in terms of global food security, poverty reduction and climate change¹³ These problems cannot be overcome unless all people are able to aspire high and realize their aspirations.

Based on this understanding, AAS will operationalize a GTA by gaining an in-depth understanding of the social contexts in which it operates. It will undertake this learning collaboratively with women, men and communities and use the process and results to foster reflection, questioning and action across stakeholders and scales to redress the underlying gender norms and power relations that enable gender disparities in resources, markets and technologies to exist and persist. The research program will apply a longitudinal comparative case study design to draw out lessons on the effectiveness of GTAs over time and across contexts in achieving lasting and inclusive social and economic change.

¹² Cornwall and Edwards 2010: 3.

¹³ Chant and Sweetman 2012.

Applying GTAs in agricultural research and practice does not entail imposing particular outcomes or a particular vision of what a 'gender equal' community looks like. Such a top down approach will not promote lasting changes. Instead, the research process must facilitate critical awareness and questioning of gender roles and norms among men and women, based on understandings of where there may be space for change.¹⁴ This process of questioning can then challenge the distribution of resources and allocation of duties between men and women, and power relationships between women, men and others in the community, such as elites or traditional leaders.

Box 3. Examples of GTAs in practice.

In Helen Keller International's and Save the Children International's USAID-funded Nobo Jibon project in Bangladesh, structural gender inequality is identified as a barrier to food and nutrition security (FNS). The project conducted a baseline survey on gender attitudes and practices to understand both how these attitudes and practices impinge on FNS, and what spaces for change emerge from contradictions between attitudes and practices and from different understandings of gender norms between men and women in the family. The agencies will use these contradictions and openings for change to inform messaging campaigns and facilitate dialogue among program participants (HKI 2011).

Since 2001, the Bangladeshi NGO BRAC has implemented an innovative program called Gender Quality Action Learning (GQAL) as part of its overall poverty reduction programs. The program involves identifying and training women, men and couples as Gender Justice Educators (GJEs) who commit to: changing gender relations in their own relationships; being voices against gender discrimination and violence against women in the community; and holding courtyard meetings where women and men from the community are encouraged to discuss gender issues with GJEs and share ideas about how to apply their learning in the community. The program also uses media campaigns and popular theatre to reinforce messages and monitors GJE efforts to track change and learn. The aim is to empower women and promote more equitable gender norms in the home and community. A recent evaluation found the program to have positive impacts, particularly on gender attitudes, and that these effects were larger when delivered in conjunction with a program focused on asset delivery to the ultra-poor (Mahmud et al. 2012).

Gender transformative research in development will need to grapple with complex issues in diverse contexts. It will involve experimenting with several context-specific approaches to merging social and technical interventions, in order to learn which of these works best, why and how. Outcomes will be emergent from processes involving multiple scales, stakeholders and pathways.¹⁵ This means that the approach needs to be supported by a culture of innovation and learning that is willing to take risks on new approaches and openly share successes and failures in order to adjust practice accordingly.

Reflecting this discussion, our current thinking on the core elements of a GTA are presented in Figure 1. These elements are not wholly absent in current agriculture, livelihoods and nutrition programming, as the examples in Box 3 show. But they are not part of the mainstream, largely because they grapple directly with power and social change, issues traditional agricultural research institutes tend to define as outside of their purview. Moving GTAs into the mainstream will admittedly be challenging given the technical nature of many stakeholders in the agriculture sector.

¹⁴ Interagency Working Group on Gender www.igwg.org.

¹⁵ Okali 2011b.

¹⁶ Weeraratne et al 2012.

A range of strategies will be necessary, including developing innovative approaches to demonstrate the relevance of gender equality to the sector, and designing non-traditional gender capacity development initiatives that enable dialogue and build from experience. Working in partnership with proponents of GTAs will be important to changing the view of the place of power and social change in achieving agricultural development outcomes. These coalitions need to cross scales, since lasting social change rests on shifting attitudes, practices and rules of the game across interlocking levels. New gender equitable practices observed among a few households that mark them as different from the 'norm' can be easily reversed if local leaders, community groups and/or informal and formal institutional practices do not support them. Key partners include:

- Communities, including leaders, willing to engage in social change processes;
- Researchers and research institutes that are early adopters of GTAs, who can serve as role models for others;
- Development agencies, many of whom have strong social justice mandates, as implementation partners;
- Private sector and media groups willing to explore win-win scenarios around facilitating gender transformative change;
- Donors, to provide the funds that enable GTAs to be tested and refined;
- Global and national advocates working on gender and rights issues related to the agricultural sector.

Conclusion

Over the past few years there has been a considerable upsurge in attention to gender in agriculture, marked by the publication of the Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook (2009); the FAO's The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–2011, which focused on closing the gender gap in agricultural development; the 2012 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, which focused on empowering rural women; and the March 2012 global conference on women in agriculture. This is unquestionably positive. It also makes it the right time to reflect critically on the 'how' of gender integration in agriculture in order to learn from its history. This brief contributes to this critical reflection by sharing an assessment of the conceptual and operational weaknesses of mainstream approaches to gender integration in agriculture. It contends that the sector needs to apply a more socially embedded and political understanding of gender to inform a transformative gender integration approach that grapples with power relations and social change.

The economic and social diversity across the AAS program countries provides challenging yet fertile ground to operationalize GTAs within efforts to enhance rural livelihoods and wellbeing.¹⁶ AAS will tackle these challenges through supporting community-led processes to advance the food security and wellbeing of the women and men whose lives depend on aquatic agricultural systems. The program will invest in capacity development to enable widespread support for and capacities to engage in the process of designing and testing GTAs. This foundation will facilitate rigorous analysis of the causes and consequences of gender inequality, the results of which will be used to support communities to reflect on and challenge the social norms that create inequalities between women and men. The program will work in partnership with communities and other research and development stakeholders to build coalitions for learning and change that produce evidence on the conditions under which GTAs do and do not produce better and more lasting agricultural development outcomes. If successful, such approaches will help both women and men to expand the quality of their livelihood choices, including by making changes in their roles, responsibilities and relationships to one another.

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With communities, changing lives

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