

## Module 5

# Research and Gender Sensitive Methods



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### Research and Gender Sensitive Research Methods

#### Expected Outcomes

1. Teachers, students and other staff are equipped to conduct gender sensitive research in institutions of higher education through compiling gender-disaggregated data and researching the lived experiences of women as staff and students.
2. Academics, managers, students and other staff recognize and are better informed about and are trained in the practical and theoretical methods of conducting gender-sensitive research as part of the pedagogy in institutions of higher learning.
3. Academic teaching staff, researchers, administrators and managers integrate their research with teaching about gender in institutions of higher education.
4. Researchers as students and academics, managers and administrators understand the policy implications, strategies, methods and techniques around gender research.

#### Gender as a Development Issue

There is broad agreement in development circles that development in Africa has stalled.<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons for this situation is that there may not be a consensus on what constitutes development: macro-economic development may provide one set of criteria, whereas the concepts and principles of governance may provide another set of criteria. Gender indicators have generally not been included in the measurement of development. These different sets of criteria may overlap and interlock, or may be separated.

The issue of gender often does not constitute a major concern in development plans and implementation programs although it is well known that the development of women may have a major impact on education, health, population growth, and family well being. It is also well known that HIV/AIDS is a function of gender dynamics in society. It is generally linked with the disempowerment of women, who constitute the majority of those with infections, and who are more likely to be infected because of their low socio-economic positions in society, such that they may not have sufficient powers of decision making to control their own bodies, and so to prevent the spread of the disease. Women may not have the decision-making power regarding how many children they will have, or whether to use the condom or not, even in cases where it is known that the husband is promiscuous.

Development policies may not be based on research and development, and may be imposed from the top without adequate consultation with those who will implement or those who are affected by the plans. Thus, many anomalies arise within the development framework. The absence of a link between research and development, and the imposition of development programmes may be some of the reasons that development has stalled.

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<sup>1</sup> Annual UNDP Development Reports consistently show that the majority of Sub-Saharan African countries have the lowest indexes for economic and human resource development globally. In a recent publication on development entitled *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, Africa scores lowest compared to OECD, Asia and Latin America (pp. 50-61) on a number of indexes.

African countries have the widest gender gaps between men and women in education, health and other indicators of development. Countries with large gender gaps in education generally have lower economic production and poorer social welfare conditions while countries with smaller gender gaps will generally have better economic production and social welfare indicators. Thus, for Africa, gender disparities are the biggest manifestations of poverty, facilitators of HIV infection and negative factors in optimizing the benefits of education. Given that investing in girls' education is the single most cost-effective investment that improves standards of living in developing countries, higher education institutions need to harness their efforts towards facilitating and training researchers to conduct gendered research. This research has to be used for economic and social purposes such as improving family incomes, improving women's participation in wage employment and in home and non-market production, increasing productivity at work, improving the skills of the labour force, improving employment opportunities, occupational mobility and earnings.

There is growing recognition that gendering all academic research in institutions of higher education will enhance the contributions made to society through higher education. With regard to population and food issue, research in the nineteen seventies indicated that development projects could be more efficient and successful if they involved more women. This resulted in the declaration of the International Women's Year in 1975 and subsequently, the UN Decade for Women and related activities since then. In the nineteen nineties, recognition that HIV is driven by gender inequalities and the subordination of women to men in African countries has highlighted the urgency of research in gender, gender gaps and gender oppression as a serious issue in higher education.

Women predominate in a number of economic sectors: women in African countries constitute 70-80% of the agriculturalists, but they may not have land rights or rights to the output of their work. It may be difficult, if not impossible, to increase agricultural productivity without taking into consideration in some detail how increased productivity will help women. If increased productivity is harmful to women, as is often the case where husbands will utilize surplus production to marry a second or third wife, the female producer may deliberately target lower productivity as a smart survival strategy.

Moreover, there are few agricultural extension programmes specifically targeted at women, so it is not known whether this gender-blind approach helps or impedes greater productivity.

Women also dominate markets in much of Africa, and in-depth research into this area will need to take gender into account. Small scale enterprises are generally known to generate more jobs than large scale enterprises as they may be more labour intensive. They are often regarded as the nurseries for the development of larger scale enterprises, yet there is inadequate research into the needs and dynamics of this sector. For example, the education, research, development, and training needs of women entrepreneurs are not generally known, because of inadequate research. Similarly, rural development depends a great deal on women, and their potential is not fully realized in a context where gender is ignored. There are fewer credit facilities for women, and there is little research into the banking needs of women agriculturalists or women entrepreneurs.

## Institutional Context

Historically, many universities have operated with very few women, both as students and as researchers. African universities only incorporated the poor after independence when state subsidies were given to large numbers of previously excluded populations to attend higher education institutions. In many African universities, there are manifest gender gaps in the enrolment of students, teachers, lecturers, professors and managers. These institutions mirror the national profiles whereby governance and administration and management are male dominated. There may be regional variations and a few institutions such as women's colleges and university but in general, Africa still maintains gender-differentiated access to colleges and universities.

The lag in development in Africa is often indicative of the failure of African higher education to address issues of equity and access creatively through their research and development. Broad and fundamental areas of development such as food security, HIV and AIDS control and poverty reduction are necessarily gendered: failure to take into account the gender dimensions severely compromises the applicability of their research and development.

Gender research can be approached as a human rights issue or as a development issue. The two are intricately intertwined. The inability of the majority of women to access higher education may severely limit their potential as economic and political players. Lack of research into the gender perspectives of development may seriously compromise or even handicap planned development.

In addition, the institutions of higher education focus on teaching of predominantly male student bodies by predominantly male staff. Accordingly, the research agenda reflects the gender composition of these institutions, making them tangential to the development issues facing their countries and societies. Poverty, infection with HIV and AIDS and underdevelopment are feminised in Africa, placing institutions of higher education in a very precarious position where males with high education have to teach, research and provide community services to and for predominantly impoverished, female, rural populations, with whom they have little contact and about whom they have scanty knowledge. This reality raises the difficult question about the research functions of African universities:

- a) What research are they conducting?
- b) How do they gather research data or information relevant to their academic activities?
- c) Who gathers this research /information?
- d) How is this information/data interpreted and utilized?

These questions have been raised not only by feminist scholars and other women but also by Third World scholars reacting to the study of the Third World by western scholars and the study of poor people by privileged elites. In higher education, researchers have a choice in the types of research that they pursue. Therefore, there is room for enriching that research through gender training for improving research quality in institutions of higher learning. These questions still have to be addressed in higher education if research is to made more relevant, cost effective and efficient in solving development problems across the continent.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It would be interesting to find out the class profile of female students in African universities. Are they mainly poor, rural people or are they representative of the middle class?

***Strategy Who should be our target population and how do they benefit from conducting gendered research?***

- All researchers should be motivated to gender their research to improve its relevance, its coverage and its quality. Gendered research should be considered superior to gender-blind research, which indicates lack of awareness of the populations one's research draws upon and serves.
- Students at all levels need to be motivated to participate where possible, in gendered research in order to enhance their competencies, their understanding of the populations they serve and to enhance their skills in the job market where they will have to service and interact with both men and women.
- Managers of higher education institutions have to invest in gender research skills in order to develop policies in staffing, investment, promotion and rewarding staff in ways that assure their institutions of stability, productivity and competitiveness in the higher education arena.
- Donors and other partners who fund research have to be motivated to understand and incorporate gender issues in all research especially in science and technology.

***What programs can be used to engender research?***

Given the fierce independence of academics and other operators with respect to what, how and when, they teach, each institution will have to make appropriate choices about the levels of intervention it can sustain, and the human and material resources to be made available for research and research teaching and training. Below are a few areas of possible intervention:

- Course work can be used to teach research issues and methods at certificate, diploma, undergraduate and graduate levels. This can be made compulsory or elective with incentives for certification on completion of the course.
- Research projects that are funded by the institution and/or its partners.
- Higher degree research by individual students who desire specialized knowledge and competence in specific areas.
- Workshops and seminars for different categories of staff that enable them to improve the quality, relevance and publication of their research.
- Short courses and professional development courses for specific disciplines or operators in the NGO sector, industry and civil service whose attendance will enhance the value of the institutional gender inputs into research.

In pursuing the above routes for gendering research, it is imperative to ensure that the trainers or lecturers have appropriate skills and competencies and can make useful inputs into research as planned.

**What Are the Issues Involved in Conducting Gendered Research?**

***The Context***

Problems and issues usually manifest themselves within a context. Whether you are an engineer, teacher or doctor, you need to be able to understand the context in which your

research issues are located. You might need to engage the assistance of a specialist who can help you to construct community profiles, histories and other issues of race, class, gender, age, ethnicity and other characteristics that affect your research. Frequently, you will find that gender and other issues interlock and cannot easily be separated.

- Are you operating in an urban or rural area?
- Are the people rich, poor, middle class?
- Are they men, women, children or mixed?
- What are the daily round of activities in the area?
- Who are likely to be helped or harmed by your research/invention/technology?
- Who /which groups have reported approval and co-operation for your research/project/technology? Why?
- Who /which have expressed disapproval? Why?
- Who /which groups are silent, withdrawn and have nothing to say about your research/technology/invention? Why?

These are some issues that may help you construct a profile of the context in which you wish to operate. You need to know what is significant in the research community so that you are not unpleasantly surprised when your research is rendered irrelevant by insufficient awareness of gender or class dynamics.

In developing the theoretic framework that informs research, methods and interpretation, there is also the question of what is more suitable for an African, post colonial context. Balancing developments in international research and the requirements of donor agencies, with what is needed and can be utilized in a specific African situation is a delicate exercise. The requirements and criteria utilized internationally may constitute a very important input into an African milieu and may provide a new perspective. On the other hand, all too often, researchers may tailor their work to outside requirements. As a result their work may be regarded as irrelevant, and may be totally ignored within the country and region.

### ***Your Position***

Your standpoint as a researcher affects how and what you choose to research, how you choose to do it, who you choose to help you and when you choose to conduct your research. Below are some of the problems and issues raised by your positioning as a gendered person of a specific class, race, ethnicity, age and religion...

- Men often choose to research issues that are important to them, assuming that women and children feel the same way about these issues.
- In gender segregated societies, men and women do not occupy the same public spaces so men will usually be cut off from women and vice versa. As a researcher you might need to conduct research with a partner of the opposite sex to access the worlds of both men and women.
- Conducting research during hours when you are free but rural women are collecting firewood skews responses and biases in collected data by gender.
- Using a questionnaire in a country where the majority of women are illiterate might result in poor response or responses by young men who are often the ones who can read and write in villages and towns.
- Preferring to research people who are less accomplished, less educated, less

wealthy than you are also produces gender, class and other assumptions, biases and attitudes which affect the questions you ask, the answers you are given, the interpretations you place on responses and the solutions you suggest.

- Researching people more powerful, more educated and more influential than you are may also produce biases related to fear, over-identification, deference, unquestioning acceptance of their responses or envy of their power.

These are but a few examples of the issues arising from positionality in the conduct of research.

## **Gender Sensitivity and Gender Design and Methods**

### ***Secondary Data***

The purposes for which you are collecting data will determine the array of research methods that you select. You might need secondary data, which have already been organized according to pre-determined principles and for other purposes. For example, in higher education, you might desire to collect data on student enrolment only to discover that the data are not gender-disaggregated. You might then have to use first names and schools attended as proxies and indicators for sex of student. If you have unisex names, try single sex schools as another proxy for sex of student.

Other sources of secondary data include journals, autobiographies, life histories, maps, photographs and supplementary physical traces of people's lives. Often, because secondary data have been collected for other purposes, it might be necessary to 'read between the lines' to deduce gendered and other meanings in the absence of primary data. Secondary data might be laborious but not impossible to engender especially when there is little time and few human and other resources. This would necessitate influencing your institution to re-organise their data collection methods to indicate sex of students or other characteristics that would enhance the gendering of data.

### **Primary Data**

The collection of primary data presents the best opportunities to engender research. Primary data collection involves conducting fieldwork or experiments over time using a variety of methods such as surveys and observation. These might involve participant and non-participant observation, interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. The main advantage of collecting primary data is that they enable us to hear the voices behind the statistics, being able to get a glimpse of the human reality on the ground of what we are investigating. This primary data can also be used as quotations or stories to build stronger advocacy for change through various mediums for disseminating this information.

Listed below are the methods of data collection and the factors enhancing or diminishing their gender sensitivity.

*i. Observation*

This is usually carried out by one or more people and can be participant or non-participant on the part of the observer. It is dependent on full access to the desired groups and phenomena and depends on the skills and acuity of the observer and their ability to attach the same social meanings to observed behaviours as the people being observed. Through participation and conversation, deciphering and confirmation of meanings is possible and the quality of data can be enhanced. However, gender, social class and other characteristics can disqualify or 'shut out' a researcher if they are not socially accepted or appropriate as observers and as participants in everyday activities.

*ii. Surveys*

These are useful for gathering data within a relatively short time from a wide range of respondents. Surveys can be conducted through questionnaires or interviews.

- Questionnaires: a researcher or their assistant(s) administer them through the mail or personally. Mailed questionnaires assume literacy, availability of time, motivation and interest on the part of the respondent. They might exclude women or others with heavy workloads, poor literacy and little confidence in the value of their views. This research method is low on gender sensitivity.
- Mailed questionnaires can be answered by anybody even when they are not the intended respondents and there is little possibility for verifying the identity and authenticity of the responses. Thus, illiterate people could have their children or husbands fill them in, sometimes inaccurately and imprecisely, negatively affecting the veracity of responses.
- In respect of mailed questionnaires, the possibilities of non-response are high and only motivated people who are forceful or keen to air their views will respond. In many societies, women are not allowed to speak to or write to strangers. They might therefore leave the response to men who might not have the right information or ignore the questionnaires altogether.
- Questionnaires and interviews administered by a researcher are open to interviewer/interviewee dynamics that depend on gender, class, age, ethnicity and religion. In sex-segregated societies, interviews have to be conducted by researchers of the same sex, introducing intra gender biases. People often try to please, to present themselves positively and it is difficult to control for interpersonal dynamics, which determine the quality of the interview.
- There is usually a preference for interviewing important or prominent people or people living near roads, railways or other places. This leads to the exclusion of the marginal people such as poor women and men, children, the elderly and people with disabilities.
- It may be easier to follow the fads and fashions of particular disciplines by prejudging issues and 'seeing' issues that can help to secure donor funding rather than the interests of respondents or particular groups.

### *iii. Interviews*

As indicated for administered questionnaires above, interviews may present problems of interviewer's gender, class, race, age and other bias. In addition, interviews depend on rapport being generated between the respondent and the interviewer.

The interviews and participant observation methods are time consuming, costly and dependent on skilled administration by the researchers. It means that there is room for gender bias unless a conscious effort is made to mitigate the possibilities of gender and other biases.

### *iv. Focus group discussions*

Focus group discussions are used to gather data from a range of people through social conversations in which different people are allowed to bring their thoughts to bear on a specific topic. In these discussions, dominance problems, which might blunt the sensitivity of these discussions, may be experienced. For example, confident people may speak out more often and to the detriment of more retiring people. In addition, poorer women and men might speak less often and less confidently than richer people and these subordinated people might in turn, not be listened to as readily as their empowered counterparts if the facilitator is swayed by the statuses of the confident people. Men in focus groups may speak more readily than women. Age differences can also play a role in the participation levels of participants.

### *v. Triangulation*

To circumvent these disadvantages and weaknesses in the sensitivity of different methodologies, triangulation may be necessary. Triangulation is a process whereby different methods are combined in order to minimize the errors and lack of sensitivity of specific methods. Thus, observation might be used in addition to interviews, focus group discussions, secondary data collection, case studies and historical studies.

## **Interpretation of Results**

The interpretation of results is a process that is fraught with gender and other biases. Interpretation involves assigning meanings to observed phenomena. Care has to be taken to explore various meanings rather than accepting the most convenient interpretation that might be biased by gender, race, class, age and other factors.

The interpretation of research results determines the uses to which the research is lent. Gender biased research produces gender biased research results which mislead policy and programmatic interventions, resulting in increased gender gaps or conflict and other problems.

## **Institutionalizing Gender as a Dimension in Research**

In your institution, you could explore the possibility of securing resources for training researchers in gender-sensitive research. This could be done through various mechanisms

such as those listed below:

- Establishing a teaching and learning center in which peer review of research is carried out to ensure that the research is gender sensitive.
- Holding periodic seminar within departments and faculties where the gender sensitivity of research can be assessed through normal and accepted academic interaction.
- Incorporating the criterion of gender sensitivity for use in the processes of review through journals, occasional papers and other publications in which academics disseminate their research findings.
- Incorporating gender as a dimension in all research projects funded by your institution and its partners.

### **Dissemination of Research**

Good quality research often ends up on shelves where they are not used, except by a few students and fellow researchers. It is important to include a plan for the dissemination of the research. In doing so, it is necessary to identify the target audience, and why the research is important for them. Different audiences can be identified, and may include:

- Fellow researchers and academics;
- The general public;
- Policy and strategy decision-makers;
- Students;
- Institutional partners, including NGOs, women's groups, donors, etc.

The reasons for disseminating research may also vary. Many academics undertake research with a view to future promotion. Others may be interested in influencing development, or changing public opinion. The identified reasons will influence the form of dissemination. Radio and television may be highly suitable for reaching the general public, whereas an academic journal may be more suitable for an academic audience. A newsletter may be better for institutional partners.

One important form of dissemination today is the internet, which is now a powerful dissemination tool to reach the young as well as the academic world. The internet can allow you to reach an international audience very quickly.

Part of the ways in which gendered research also distinguishes itself by including some form of intervention for the researched group so that they too can benefit from the work. This is part of being socially responsible, giving something back to the community from which you got the data.

### **Activity 5A**

Identify a possible research topic; write down the objectives of the research and its methodology. Discuss in small groups about the feasibility of conducting the research.

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