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A resource for scientists and research teams

CHALLENGING GENDER MYTHS: Promoting inclusive wheat and maize research for development in Nepal

A number of persistent myths slow down agricultural innovation in wheat and maize in Nepal.

- **Myth 1. Men are the main decision makers.**
- **Myth 2. Women don't do much in wheat and maize.**
- **Myth 3. Women don't innovate.**
- **Myth 4. Women lack resources for innovation.**

This technical note provides research evidence debunking these myths. Women's and men's roles in wheat and maize are changing rapidly due to high levels of male outmigration, improved educational opportunities, and development activities which

promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Agriculture in Nepal is becoming strongly feminized. Women are working ever longer hours in the field, and, increasingly, taking control over decision making in wheat and maize, including in communities where women have previously been secluded.

Understanding and working with women in wheat- or maize-related innovation processes will help to improve the design and relevance of innovations, and contribute towards adoption and adaptation of technologies and practices. However, there is a mismatch between the reality of women's roles and responsibilities in wheat and maize on the ground, and the almost complete lack of targeting of women for capacity development

by rural advisory services, particularly in wheat. Fortunately, policies in Nepal are encouraging to women, there is a thriving research sector, and civil society actors are generally strong. Supporting women alongside men to innovate in maize and wheat is very feasible.

Research data for this technical note is drawn from GENNOVATE (Enabling Gender Equality in Agricultural and Environmental Innovation) research in Nepal conducted in 2015¹. Six case studies, three for wheat and three for maize, were developed in Myagdi, Chitwan, Rupandehi, and Jajarkot Districts. Whilst each location had specific socioeconomic characteristics, the study findings are comparable across all sites.

1. For more information, including individual reports from across the CGIAR, please visit <https://gender.cgiar.org/themes/gennovate/>.

MYTH 1. Men are the main decision makers

A widely held myth in Nepal is that men are key decision makers in all aspects of life. Farmers reflected these norms in discussions. One man said, "I am the household head. So I decide everything." Another man explained that "without the support of the husband, the wife can't act. Her husband's agreement is needed. His support and advice is needed to bring change in the field." A young woman commented on the effect of male dominance, "Men do not allow women to go ahead. They prohibit us from taking decisions. If women go out or take decisions, men raise questions about their character."

However, the majority of men discuss innovation options with their wives, parents, seed sellers, extension agents, and friends. The "soft power" and influence of the spouse is important. As one man commented, "My wife and I discuss together if hired labor is needed or not. We make a crop calendar and manage all the things accordingly. I am the household head and I consult with my wife. I share everything with my wife. We discuss and come to a conclusion as to what to do. We decide together." Another man added, "When selecting hybrid seed we,

the couple, argue. I may say we should plant the same seed across the whole plot and my wife may say – based on her observations in a friend's field – 'No, we will plant multiple varieties.' We decide together."

The GENNOVATE data further shows that extended families increasingly recognize that, in the absence of men who have migrated to other countries, their daughters-in-law must be empowered to take important farming decisions. According to the men, "A wife consults with her husband and if the husband is away she consults with in-laws." Women who are successful in gaining the backing of their extended family benefit strongly from their wholehearted support and provision of resources.

The reality of male outmigration means that women's mobility is increasing as well, including in districts where women's mobility has been strongly limited in the past. This relaxation enables women to market crops and livestock, attend agricultural training events, and to join community groups. As a consequence, women are becoming more knowledgeable about wheat and maize innovations,

contacting agricultural experts for advice, and sharing ideas with other women on how best to proceed. These new roles build on domains where women have traditionally held key decision-making responsibilities in seed selection, post-harvest processing, and storage.

Nevertheless, marital status, age, religion, socio-economic status, caste, and literacy levels can all play a role in limiting women's ability to innovate. Mothers often exert strong influence over their adult sons' decisions. Newly married younger women generally experience the least influence, particularly in extended families. Women in some castes/ethnicities generally enjoy more decision-making power than in other castes/ethnicities, though the GENNOVATE data cannot make categorical associations between caste/ethnicity and innovative behaviors.

Overall, however, the GENNOVATE data shows that enormous changes have occurred in a very short time span, generally over the past 10 years. It is no longer true for most locations that men are the main decision makers.





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MYTH 2. Women don't do much in wheat and maize

It is often assumed that women are primarily responsible for work in the household and for looking after children. Empirical evidence of women working in the fields across the production cycle of wheat and maize is overlooked, with the result that men are typically targeted by the rural advisory services for training in wheat and maize innovations. As one woman observed, “Women do not get opportunities like men.”

However, women generally conduct the same work in the fields as men (apart from ploughing). One woman said, “We don't have such a thing as men working on men's plots and women working on women's plots. All tasks are done together regardless of who owns the farmland and other assets.”

However, the absence of working-age men in many communities means that women are taking on the burden of any added labor associated with innovations. A woman explained, “The key issues here are how to control pests and to get good seeds. We all try labor-saving methods because it is difficult to find laborers, and it is expensive to employ them. Only a limited group of women have access to training and information; others do not have any opportunity.” In some cases, men retain control over the marketing of wheat and maize, but in other cases, men as well as women agree that women can and should sell.

Young men help in farming, but many lack motivation because they expect to out-migrate. Conversely, many young

women are strongly active in farming because few leave the community to work elsewhere. In some communities this allows them to participate actively in learning processes, as reflected by this quote from a young women's focus group: “Women do not go abroad for foreign employment. Therefore women are getting more opportunities. Girls are taking up further education, attending training courses and excursions, and joining groups and associations.” Other young women reported, however, that social norms hamper their participation in innovation processes. They are being groomed for early marriage and to fulfill household duties and future maternal responsibilities.

MYTH 3. Women don't innovate

Across the case studies, there was little evidence that rural advisory services actively target women in these crops as part of their institutional level targeting strategy. As a consequence, men have better access to sources of information, and to networks which facilitate innovation. Since they are trained directly by agricultural technicians, men are able to learn rapidly and to try out their ideas straightaway under expert guidance. Men are also much more likely than women to operate tractors and other labor-saving machinery. Women remarked on their isolation: "If there had been a woman technician, she would have visited our village regularly, and we could have asked about many things regarding agriculture. But we don't have a woman technician." Taken together, these factors explain the common belief that women do not innovate in wheat and maize.

However, despite these constraints, the GENNOVATE data overwhelmingly shows that many women farmers are active innovators. Women negotiate with their husbands and extended families to get training and to join

groups. Some women seek out extension advisors and successful farmers to learn more. According to one woman, "We have learned to use improved wheat seeds, agricultural machinery, and different types of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. As a result, we can produce more wheat and earn more money. We cultivate all crops for sale." Another woman remarked, "We are cultivating wheat on a large scale. We really need improved varieties." There is also evidence that individual extension agents work with women due to their personal commitment to women's development. This support really makes a difference. As explained by one woman:

I was the first person to innovate in the village. I was selected to test improved varieties of wheat using new cultivation methods. Another woman was selected to continue with the traditional method of sowing. I prepared rows at a distance of 20 cm and sowed seeds. As a consequence, the wheat plants grew very nicely with 8 to 9 bunches in each plant. Later the extension officer came

and compared production on my land and the woman following the traditional method. They found mine was better with big bunches and more wheat production.

Despite this experience, many women innovate without any support from extension services. They explained that they watch other farmers experiment and then create their own experiments. Women highlighted how they feel strongly motivated through working with other women innovators: they share ideas and advice with each other. The lack of extension support usually means that their learning cycles take longer than for men, but this does not appear to discourage women, and some have become very successful. As one woman observed, "At first I was not aware of new technologies in agriculture. However, these days I plant improved varieties of wheat and use chemical fertilizers and mechanized agricultural tools. I am making a lot of money." Women inspire and support other women, and they act as role models for each other.



MYTH 4. Women lack resources for innovation

In Nepal, it is quite common to hear the adjective “destitute” used to describe the state of women. In agriculture this concept shades into a belief that women lack the resources required for innovation in wheat and maize. In common with the other myths, there is some veracity to this. Negative feedback loops caused by the myth that women do not innovate contribute to a paucity of resources being made available to women innovators.

For instance, agricultural equipment is rarely designed to suit the needs of women farmers and few efforts are made to gain social acceptance for women to use rotavators. Working and investment capital can be problematic: it can be more difficult for women, in the absence of their husbands, to obtain enough money to finance their innovations, even when they hold land title. Time is a particularly prominent constraint. Housework, managed almost exclusively by women, is very time consuming. One woman explained that “the workload of women has increased due to the

absence of our husbands. Now we have to do housework and go out to hire machinery, manage labor, and do irrigation ourselves.” In some cases, women address labor constraints by engaging in reciprocal labor exchange schemes. This is very common in hilly districts.

Nevertheless, women are gaining improved access to some resources. Credit providers increasingly target women. This is assisting poorer women and their families to escape bonded labor conditions and sharecropping, and to enter own account farming. For the first time, some of the poorest women and men are starting to innovate.

The data is clear that women are innovating in wheat and maize through necessity and sometimes the sheer pleasure of doing things differently. Many women linked their drive to innovate, despite all the difficulties, to their roles as mothers and aspirations for their children’s future. They continue to attend to

family responsibilities, but equally are becoming breadwinners. Success is not only associated with higher yields or more income. An improvement in technical capacity translates into women being seen as competent, respectful, and progressive farmers. Women stressed how success in innovating in wheat and maize helps them meet cultural values. These include harmonious relationships with friends and family, raising children with good values, spiritual wellbeing, and being content in life.

Finally, community groups are pivotal in spreading the concept of equality between women and men. Women frequently emphasized that the active promotion of equal treatment for women and gender equality in these groups is fundamental to building their confidence and willingness to innovate. Indeed, some women said it was a precondition. Believing they are as good as men provides women with the courage to succeed.



Moving ahead: Opportunities for research and development

Distinguishing between gender myths about what women “don’t decide” and “don’t do” in wheat and maize, and the reality of what women actually decide and do, is important. Widely held gender norms (from which myths are drawn) continue to structure expectations of what men and women should do, but in myriad ways these norms are being “hollowed out” and renegotiated in ways which support important cultural values whilst allowing change to happen. Understanding, recognizing, and building on these change processes is essential if innovation processes in wheat and maize are to be successful. A few thoughts on how key actors can support women in innovation are given here.

Researchers

More research studies into how women innovate are needed. Potential areas of inquiry include: How do women develop formal and informal innovation networks with other women, and with local experts? In what ways do women expand their decision-making power in intra-household discussions with their spouses, and with their extended family, in order to promote their innovation capacity? Does the absence of men in the household facilitate, or hamper, women’s innovation? In what ways are men, including men decision makers at the community level, supporting women to innovate? How are gender norms shifting to accommodate women as innovators, and are changes to norms likely to be permanent? How are innovation processes supporting

valued concepts of a “good life”?

Research into intersectionalities between gender, socio-cultural markers of identity (caste, religion, ethnicity), age, economic status, household typology, and participation in innovation processes would provide valuable information for project design.

Agronomic research, preferably cross-cutting with some of the above areas of inquiry, into women’s preferred technical innovations is essential, including with respect to labor-saving machinery. Research into gendered trade-offs between different kinds of innovation is also needed.

Rural advisory services

It is critical for rural advisory services, at an institutional level, to recognize women as innovators in wheat and maize. Gender-sensitive targeting and capacity development strategies need to be developed. Women-friendly training events are essential, as is ongoing support. This may require the deployment of more women extension staff (with support as necessary) in some locations, and re-orientating men staff to recognize women as wheat and maize innovators.

Few young men see a future in agriculture. Is it possible to turn this around by finding ways to support some young men in agricultural innovation processes? What needs to happen to allow parents and other family members to see an agricultural



Photo: Peter Lowe/CIMMYT.

occupation as viable for their sons? Young women are Nepal’s future farmers. How can extension services encourage and support them to innovate, and how can this learning be sustained through periods when young women, for example upon marriage, may experience mobility and other constraints? How can parents be persuaded to encourage their daughters to become active innovators?

NGOs and other development partners

Gender equality messages set out by development partners and the government make a difference. Community organizations which walk the talk on gender, for instance by training women in budgeting, planning, public speaking, and leadership, help women to feel powerful and be able to innovate.

Development partners can help to introduce labor-saving machinery to save women's time in wheat and maize, and in other agricultural tasks. It is equally important to develop and

introduce labor- saving devices to help women manage house and care work.

Household methodologies can help women and men to develop shared visions for their lives, and to recognize and work together to overcome gender barriers to innovation. Household methodologies encourage women and men to share household chores and care work by helping spouses and the wider family to see the win-win situation this creates. Other gender-transformative approaches include some which recruit women and men as farmer scientists. This helps them to develop their research skills on their own land with their own crops and animals. They are trained to develop hypotheses, to set up study conditions, and to record and discuss results.



Photo: Peter Lowe/CIMMYT.

Suggestions for further reading

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To learn more visit:
gender.cgiar.org/collaborative-research/gennovate/

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