The Hidden Mirror: Sexual and Gender Minorities in Agricultural Research
Geoffrey O’Keefe¹, Jane Alver², Bosibori Bett³

¹Capacity Building Manager, Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
²Doctoral candidate, University of Canberra
³Project Officer (Research), Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research

Abstract
This paper and conference discussion will highlight the invisibility of Sexual and Gender Minorities (SGM) within agricultural research. Through a review of the literature, the authors posit that the majority of gender in agriculture research focuses on binary gender identities, with little space for gender diverse expressions or sexuality outside heteronormative frameworks of the ‘family’. Through these (binary) narratives, researchers work to identify power imbalances between women and men, with a view to ‘empowerment’, and, more recently developing understandings of ‘masculinity’.

Looking outside agriculture research, gender researchers are beginning to investigate diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. This includes interdisciplinary approaches in the health sector, humanitarian response, and education. Contemporary research is finding through investigation of power and access within societies that SGM groups often have less access to resources, and voice, with development and research interventions almost always overlooking their diverse roles in society and specific needs. Given the pivotal role of gender research in agriculture uncovering inequalities in power and access between men and women, and the resultant impacts on food security, nutrition and production, this framework should be extended to include vulnerable groups such as SGM.

This paper presents an opportunity to discuss the integration of SGM in agricultural research, to broaden our theoretical and methodological approaches. This can provide greater insight into power dynamics in agriculture that are as yet not studied in the literature. We hope to expand researcher’s understanding of sexual and gender diversity, and collaboratively develop common approaches to integrating greater diversity in agricultural research for development.

Introduction

This paper acknowledges that there is significant work already happening regarding gender and agriculture, what is of concern is that there seems to be little to no unpacking of the non-binary and diverse nature of gender and sexuality within agricultural research.

The role of women in global agriculture and their contribution to rural economies and enterprises well is recognised. In the developing world, women possess multiple roles in agriculture and constitute approximately forty three percent of agricultural labour (Kumar, 1987; FAO, 2011a). It is evident that women in these countries, play substantial roles in providing food and nutrition security at household level (FAO, 2011a). Although agriculture paves the way to increase food production and improve food security and poverty reduction, its performance is partly constrained because women face several gender-related constraints thereby affecting agricultural productivity (FAO, 2011b). These include limited access to resources (land, water, livestock, farm inputs, tools, markets and services), technology development and dissemination, and decision-making (Quisumbing et al. 2014; World Bank, FAO, IFAD (2015a); Doss et al. 2015).

Cognisant to this, it is expected that narrowing the gap between men and women’s access to agricultural resources will increase agricultural production by up to 4% in developing countries (FAO, 2011a; FAO, 2011b). As such, strategies to integrate and mainstream gender in agriculture including livestock, fisheries and aquaculture, for both research and development towards gender equitable
provisions have been exemplified (CGIAR, 2014; World Bank, 2009; World Bank; FAO; IFAD; 2015a; COMESA, 2016; SPC, 2017; Barclay et al., 2019; Manfre et al., 2017; Drucza and Peveri, 2018; Bowman et al., 2009; Fanworth et al. 2015). These include development of gender frameworks, formulation of gender centred policies and constitution of expert group meetings, to guide and make informed decisions, thereby providing enabling environments to promote gender equality in agricultural production and women’s empowerment globally (CGIAR, 2014; World Bank; FAO; IFAD; 2015a); Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2009; Quisumbing et al., 2014; Farnworth, 2011; COMESA, 2016; Manfre et al. 2017). In these gender strategies, women are primarily the centre of focus, with their challenges and barriers to agricultural production, and interventions or mechanisms to address these outlined (World Bank; FAO; IFAD; 2015b; Huyer, 2016; Akter et al. 2017). This is well articulated within livestock (Vaidnavi, 2001; Paudel et al., 2009; Njuki et al., 2013; Njuki and Sanglinga, 2013; Kristjanson et al., 2014), conservation agriculture (Wekesah et al. 2019; Farnworth et al., 2016), climate change and climate variability (Odoyo et al., 2019; Khatri-Chhetri et al., 2017; Kristjanson et al., 2017; CGIAR, 2012; World Bank; FAO; IFAD, 2015b), agricultural extension (Ragasa, 2012), agricultural value-chains (Farnworth, 2011), agricultural technologies, innovations and adoption (Doss, 2001; Manfre et al. 2017; Theis, 2017), agrobiodiversity (Howard, 2003; and agroforestry (Kiptot and Franzel, 2012).

It is evident that gender research in agricultural development excludes individuals outside heteronormative sexuality and binary masculine or feminine gender identities. This paper uses the term Sexual and Gender Minorities (SGM) as an inclusive umbrella term for individuals who do not identify as male or female, and/or individuals who do not identify as heterosexual. SGM includes considerable diversity of sexual identity, including Western-defined sexual identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual and pansexual, and localised sexual identities that are outside the heteronorm. SGM also includes gender identities outside of the male/female binary, these may be recognised multi-country identities, such as transgender or intersex, or localised forms of gender expression that transgress hegemonic understandings of masculinity or femininity. Most literature cited on gender in agriculture as well as the main focus of gendered policy is centred around women and men (gender binary), living in heteronormative family structures (World Bank; FAO; IFAD 2015a; Johnson et al. 2016; Doss et al., 2014; Bannon and Correa, 2006). However, we acknowledge that an inclusive gender sensitive policy environment is essential for achieving gender equitable outcomes. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2015) acknowledges that “Despite the good practices and promising approaches observed through the cases analysed, the existing national policy, legal and institutional environment presents several challenges to the promotion of inclusive and gender-equitable investments in agriculture”.

Why sexual and gender minorities in agriculture?

There is very little literature on SGM in agriculture nor is evidence found of agricultural policies that explicitly reference these groups. An empirical search on sexual and gender minorities in agriculture returned no hits or articles, hence the relevance and impacts of SGM in agriculture is unknown, or known to a very minimal extent (Leslie, 2017; Leslie, 2019). Leslie (2017, 2019) reports sexual minorities in agriculture in the United States, focusing on farmers who identify themselves outside the heterosexual or cis gender, herein known as ‘queer’. The study by Leslie (2017) acknowledges that “none of the extant literature examines the experiences of transgender farmers, which may lend further insights into the role of gender in the transition to sustainable agriculture”. While Leslie (2017) identifies that land acquisition for queer farmers is integral towards sustainable agriculture encompassing the social, economic and environmental facets (Leonardo Academy 2015 in Leslie 2017), the acquisition of this resource for queer farmers engaged in small scale agriculture is however influenced by sexuality and heteronormativity, which is surrounded by heterosexism. It was further illuminating of the need for a dialogue around inclusion of SGM that a range of experts in the field could not identify a case study that demonstrates the integration of SGM narratives in agricultural research.
In other disciplines of gender studies and practice, SGM are beginning to be recognised and included. Study on SGM has featured in development studies, where Jolly (2000) explores what same-sex sexualities have to offer to a gender and development (GAD) approach. While Jolly (2000) asserts that “gender norms concerned with sexuality shape both women’s and men’s lives, these norms are pervasive, determining the sexual aspect of our lives, and shape our access to economic resources, and our ability to participate in social and political activities”. Jolly (2000) further acknowledges the reluctance of GAD to engage and address sexuality, in the context of same-sex sexualities, and offers notions around interreference with local culture, the mentality that same-sexuality is native to the West and; respecting the intimate boundaries of people’s lives. The article recommends mainstreaming ‘queer’ into social policy and GAD though targeting queer groups for support; embracing community, understanding household and family perceptions; integrating queer accessible approaches into health, education and youthwork, and; institutionalising queer understandings (Jolly, 2000). McSherry et al. (2015) go on to explore mainstreaming a non-Western gender minority group known as Bakla into a dimension of development planning, the disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the Philippines. Although this group is discriminated, stigmatised, and excluded in the Filipino society, it has gained recognition in development work noting their role in facilitating dialogue between males and females, planning and commencing community projects, organising relief for the community during periods of disaster and clearing up in the aftermath of the calamity in spite of their needs not being met. The extensive networks of Bakla are therefore effective during seasons of disaster management.

Following a tropical cyclone, Winston, in the Pacific (Fiji), a post disaster needs assessment made no reference to the needs of SGM members, albeit their minimal recognition in the calamity (Dwyer and Woolfe, 2018). A participatory field research revealed that these groups faced violence, harassment, trauma, family and community pressures, discrimination, rejection by their faith communities and limited access to their needs including housing, shelter and sanitation. Despite these, Dwyer and Woolfe (2018) propose strategies to embrace SGM groups in DRR. These include creating awareness on barriers and opportunities to include minority groups; establishing strong informal networks and supportive community groups and/or leaders; initiating dialogue between faith-based leaders and/or organisations and SGM groups and; incorporate inclusivity in Community Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM) (Dwyer and Woolfe, 2018).

In the health discipline diverse gender and sexual identities are revealed in research on HIV/AIDS programmes in South-East Asia (Earth, 2006). Earth (2006) demonstrates that failure to recognise SGM groups in HIV prevention campaigns and strategies leads to flawed public health outcomes. Further, Mayer et al. (2008) and Willging et al. (2006) highlight a range of specific clinical and health needs of SGM and propose how these can be addressed to create a healthier environment for SGM patients. This includes providing appropriate physical and mental healthcare and services, community support systems and; creating awareness and training medical and public health providers and practitioners interacting with SGM patients.

While there has been no work in identifying and highlighting SGM narratives in agricultural research, the authors believe that this is a significant gap in our gender research and practice. From a ‘Do No Harm’ approach focusing solely on gender inequalities between heterosexual men and women, we may inadvertently be entrenching bias and discrimination and other forms of social exclusion (Jauhola, 2010). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide further impetus for our approaches to be more inclusive, including the pledge to “leave no one behind, thereby committing to prioritize the poorest and most marginalised” (O’Malley and Holzinger, 2018).

From a research perspective, limiting our focus to the sexual and gender majorities in a community does not uncover the full spectrum of power relations that impact on, or are impacted by agriculture. For the limited research that exists from other fields, it has been shown that SGM groups are less able to access technologies, education, health and financial services and are often among the most marginalised in society (Anyamele et al. 2005; Willging et al. 2006; Leslie, 2017;
O’Malley and Holzinger, 2018). Logically, the authors assert this would also apply to agriculture with SGM groups having less access to agricultural extension and research services.

A quick survey of SGM in around the world illustrates that sexual and gender diversity exists globally and agricultural research is conducted in countries and societies with significant groups of SGM. In the Pacific for example, the Tongan gender identity of Fakoleiti is a recognized gender identity (separate to Western notions of transgenderism), while similar gender identities in Samoa and Hawaii are termed Fa’afafine, and Mahu respectively (Wallace, 1999; Farran, 2010). Although the term Bakla is derivative, it is beginning to gain positive meaning in contemporary Philippine (Manalansan, 2015) while in India, a third gender, Hijra, is recognized, despite its elimination by colonial law Wieringa, 2010). Hijra communities are also present in Bangladesh and Pakistan (Wieringa, 2010) while, in south east Asia, Kathoey (a male attracted to another male) was traditionally recognised as a third sex or gender in Thailand. The kwolu-oatimwoi is a recognised third gender category in Papua New Guinea (PNG) although they face discrimination and limited gendered spaces for expression. Indonesia’s Bugis exemplifies gender pluralism, unrestricted to binary gender division and highly regarded in society (Earth, 2006; Wieringa, 2010).

Although we see the need to engage with SGM in agriculture, there are identified apprehensions in research and practice communities around the engagement and inclusion of these vulnerable groups. Individual researchers and practitioners often have limited experience with SGM, and express ‘fears’ around how to commence conversations with SGM communities (Dwyer and Woolf, 2018). Moreover, there is limited guidance from global, regional or national policy bodies and limited good practice resources for engaging with SGM communities (Dwyer and Woolf, 2018). The authors believe that such guidance should be developed to increase researchers’ and practitioners’ confidence and skills in engaging with SGM in agriculture.

Critics of integrating SGM narratives in agriculture or other sectors claim that these understandings are not ‘localised’, or ‘indigenous’ and are activist and euro-centric (Jolly, 2000). In a review, Langlois (2016) sheds light on global sexuality politics within international relations, explaining that the politics of Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) is shaped from the global North and applied to the South, and such politics are not relevant to local contexts in developing countries (de Vos, 2015; Langlois, 2016). Beyond the politics of LGBTQ, various forms of sexual and gender identities have been and are present in localised forms across the world, including in key sites of agricultural research. These SGM are embedded with their own specific cultural, historical, and social meanings. To bluntly translate sexual and gender diversity into the lexicon of LGBTQ can alienate the social and cultural meaning of these identities, as well as the underlying power dynamics and agency of individuals and groups in developing countries (Wallace, 1999). Conceptualising diversity through the lens of SGM allows researchers and practitioners to identify localised gendered understanding and develop culturally responsive research and practice in those societies.

This paper initiates a discussion around SGM in gender research in agricultural research for development, and develop common understandings, framework and approaches towards integrating SGM into our research. It is envisaged that this will present opportunities to expand our knowledge on gendered power relations and more accurately represent people’s lived experiences in agricultural research for development.

Way forward

In addressing the challenge of integrating greater sexual and gender diversity into our gender research in agriculture, researchers need to improve our understandings of SGM in agriculture. This will require a concerted, purposeful research undertaking uncovering the specific culturally and socially significant drivers of power that impacts on and is impacted by these groups. Uncovering SGM access to resources, education, agricultural research and extension will be key to assessing social marginalisation/inclusion strategies for these groups. Gender researchers will also need to
develop common approaches to integrating gender and sexual diversity in agricultural research for development. In line with the challenge to mainstream SGM, we call upon the conference participants, and the wider research for development (R4D) community to expand the ‘mainstreaming’ agenda (to include SGM). In order to do this, we suggest the following next steps:

- Commit to building our individual and organisational capacity to include SGM in agricultural research and training programs and policy.
- Be mindful of who is being impacted and who is being left behind when we talk of gender.
- Be alert to case studies of ways of including SGM in our research and practice in ways sensitive to cultural norms and share these with practitioners and research community.
- Go beyond the gender binary when designing and implementing programs.
- Become familiar with the terms used in each context through local understandings of SGM.
- Get to the know the local organisations advocating for SGM and consult with them for inclusion.
- Extend the evidence base and include whole-of-community research.
- Undertake collaborative research practices with SGM to learn, reflect, reframe.
- Engaging others in this inclusion so the drive for diversity has wide buy-in.
- Come back to the conference next year with case studies of inclusion, success, collaborative efforts, articles, papers and new networks of thought leaders from SGM to influence all our work.

Conclusion

Shining a spotlight on sexual and gender minorities as an important part of gender in agricultural research will extend the evidence base and include whole-of-community research. Collaborative research practices with sexual and gender minorities is an opportunity to learn, reflect, reframe. Case studies of inclusion, success, collaborative efforts, articles, papers and new networks of thought leaders from sexual and gender minorities will serve to influence all our work.

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