Gender refers to the social roles and identities associated with what it means to be a man or a woman in a given society or context. Gender roles may be shaped by ideological, religious, ethnic, economic and cultural factors and are a key determinant of the distribution of responsibilities and resources between men and women (Moser 1989).

At Bioversity International, we focus on sustainably managing and conserving the rich agricultural and forest biodiversity—species, varieties, and their products—that result from a long process of trial and selection by culturally diverse farmer and forest communities across the world. These women and men hold a vast and gender-specific knowledge adapted to the diverse physical environments in which they live.

Women’s and men’s differentiated priorities, access to, capacities and benefits from agricultural and forest biodiversity affect their resource management strategies. Engaging with the diversity of people who have shaped this biodiversity and the multiple ways they manage and use it is essential for understanding and conserving that diversity effectively, and for promoting equitable benefits from its use.

Bioversity International addresses gender issues in three ways. First, we carry out ‘gender-responsive research’ by applying a gender lens to other research disciplines, such as climate change or nutrition. Second, we conduct ‘strategic gender research’ as a specialized exploration of gender relations and biodiversity. Third, we strive to make our research ‘gender transformative’ by supporting practices and policies that reshape the dynamics between men and women in ways that have more equitable outcomes.

The research methodology we use for gender-responsive and socially inclusive research includes participatory methods, mixed methods, in-depth case studies and cross-cutting and comparative analyses across research work areas. The following case studies illustrate each research approach.
between ecosystem services and how they are perceived and used by women and men. Researchers found that the women mentioned more crops with a high nutritional content, indicating that they are central to ensuring household nutrition, whereas the men were more interested in high-value crops with a role in economic security. By mapping these roles spatially, the scientists could identify with communities crop cultivation practices benefiting all members of the community—men and women.

The organizational capacity and experiences of women and men farmers were analyzed. Based on this, roles, rules and regulations for the governance of the community seedbanks were developed. The process was facilitated through a series of discussions and collective decision-making steps paying particular attention to local power and gender relations.

Crop diversity in the farm is low, and seed exchange, largely in the hands of women, mostly takes place with fellow church members based on a relationship of trust. The community seedbank is the concrete result of research conducted by South Africa’s Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and Bioversity International since 2013 into how gender relations shape patterns of seed saving and exchange and the implications for effective implementation of the country’s national in situ crop conservation strategy.

Key strategic gender research questions included how social and gender relationships influence the choice of crops and crop varieties. We explored current seed-saving practices and how they are influenced by social and gender relationships and analyzed the organizational capacity and experiences of women and men farmers. Based on this, roles, rules and regulations for the governance of the community seedbanks were developed.

The women who govern and operate the community seedbank are giving priority to maintaining nutritious crops and varieties that are easy to combine in preparation of traditional dishes, require few inputs, are drought-pest- and disease-resistant, have a short growing cycle and can be stored for long periods of time.

Strategic gender research
Understanding gendered relationships of seed systems and exchange underpinning in situ conservation

Gumbu village in Limpopo province, a remote dryland area with poor access to the market, is now home to a thriving community seedbank run by 40 women farmers.

Farming in Gumbu is largely done by women, while men usually keep some livestock away from the village.

Gender-transformative research
Using value-addition and collective action centred on a traditional grain for economic empowerment

Millet has been part of the food culture of India and Nepal for millennia. Bioversity International and partners conducted a gender analysis of the millet agricultural system looking into the gendered institutional and socio-economic barriers to the successful production and sale of traditional millets. One objective was to harness women’s involvement in the millet value chain to support their empowerment.

The research identified that the long drudgery in processing millet was a key factor dissuading women from producing the grain, and a bottleneck for its wider distribution and consumption. The scientists worked with the women to develop millet dehusking machines. In addition, they tackled other institutional barriers to empowerment through collective action, capacity strengthening and the provision of financial services to women producers and self-help groups.

Making it easier to process and consume these super grains inspired the local women to sell new recipes at the local markets. The self-help groups now farm up to six different varieties of millet on their farms, and have 11 organic products on market shelves across India. This has allowed them to reach out to banks for loans, make a steady income and share seeds with other communities.

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