Introduction to Special Issue: Gender and Rural Development: Sustainable Livelihoods in a Neoliberal Context

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Abstract: This editorial introduces the articles that are part of the Special Issue on ‘Gender and Rural Development: Sustainable Livelihoods in a Neoliberal Context.’

Keywords: agrarian transition; gender and development; market-led development; neoliberalism; seed systems; sustainable livelihoods; women’s empowerment

Women’s significant contributions to agricultural work, as well as exclusions from control over land, livestock, and income, are important reasons for incorporating gender concerns in rural development programs. Gender biases, deeply integrated in formal and informal institutions (such as local traditions and national laws), have normalized worldwide inequitable shares of agricultural work and benefits between women and men, and across other social markers of power. The rise of neoliberal development policies since the 1990s has continued this trend. While women have increasingly been incorporated as entrepreneurial subjects amenable to market-led livelihoods, markets have also intensified existing class and gender disadvantages. Alongside, the installation of sustainability as a key development discourse, most recently through the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, has led to increasing recognition of rural women’s roles in sustaining both household welfare and livelihoods. Environmental challenges related to climate and urbanization further underline the need to take the gendered nature of rural livelihoods into account in the devising of development strategies. Given this present conjuncture of neoliberal policies and sustainability discourses, how can the study of gender and rural development be configured to further illuminate the role of gender differences and inequalities in agricultural livelihoods?

The nine articles in this Special Issue suggest three themes that can be followed in terms of a deeper understanding of the gendered aspects of contemporary rural development: (i) how women are acting as agents of change and collaboration at the neoliberalism–sustainability conjuncture, (ii) how gender roles shape women’s enrollment in production and consumption networks, and (iii) how an attentiveness to women’s perspectives reveals the need to rethink popular discourses of development.

1. Women as Agents of Change and Collaboration

As rural societies engage with new market opportunities and global environmental change, gender differences often shape how these engagements unfold. Thus, women may inhabit a range of subject positions—from seeking to combine economic and environmental sustainability, being more open than men to commercial ventures, to remaining excluded from the ability to adopt sustainable options. Halim, Barbieri, Morais, Jakes, and Seekamp [1] focus on agritourism entrepreneurs in the U.S. to draw out gendered meanings that are ignored in mainstream approaches to rural development. Their study provides women’s perspectives on the more-than-economic aims of their agritourism practices, thus situating women at the forefront of sustainable rural development. Additionally, this article also questions the way in which ‘success’ is understood, contrasting the economic discourse of what counts as success with gendered discourses of how success is
actually experienced. Therefore, there is a need to question the hegemony of patriarchal and masculine frameworks in discourses of development.

Utilizing a game-based approach to decision making, Larson, (Giger)-Dray, Cornioley, Thephavanh, Thammavong, Vorlasan, Connell, Moglia, Case, Alexander, and Perez [2] explore how gender shapes the adoption of new agricultural practices among smallholder farmers in Laos. Women farmers were found to be more willing to adopt new rice varieties as well as cooperate with other women participants. This study thus shows why women should be targets in constructing more collaborative market opportunities, and the utilization of a game-based framework possibly enables a more open articulation of women’s preferred practices. Gendered aspects of the transformation from subsistence to commercial farming in Laos are also detailed in another article in this Special Issue, which is discussed in the next section.

Dwelling on the significant issue of adaptation to climate change, Otieno, Zebrowski, Recha, and Reynolds [3] find a contrasting situation. In East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda), women’s higher levels of reliance on informal seed sharing networks as compared to men often makes them less able to access new and improved crop varieties, which are mostly available through formal marketing channels and can ensure food security under changing climatic conditions. By employing network analysis, this study is able to clearly show how seed networks for bean, finger millet, and sorghum are clustered by gender, and the tracing of multiple crops in multiple locations usefully contextualizes the links between gender and seed networks. The absence of improved varieties in women’s networks when compared to men’s networks highlights the need to input improved varieties in informal networks in order to support rural livelihoods of both women and men. The need for plant breeding policies to focus on gendered contexts also emerges in two other articles in this Special Issue, as discussed below.

2. Gender in Relational Networks of Production and Consumption

Since gender dynamics and norms shape the distribution of work and property, women and men are often positioned differently in terms of their access to and control over household and community resources and outcomes. Three articles in this Special Issue provide a relational perspective on gender by contrasting how women and men are positioned in welfare and livelihood practices. Galiè, Farnworth, Njiru, and Alonso [4] focus on gender differences in responsibilities for household milk procurement and consumption in peri-urban Kenya and Tanzania. One of their main findings is that while men are often viewed as responsible for buying milk, women are viewed as being in charge of deciding how milk becomes part of food within households. This insight is useful in formulating nutrition policies, especially since milk is an important part of constructing a diversified diet for low-income households.

Nkengla-Asi, Eforuoku, Olaosebikan, Ladigbolu, Amah, Hanna, and Kumar [5] focus on the important issue of the control of plant diseases by highlighting gendered aspects of the sharing of banana planting material in Nigeria. Comparing sites with and without banana bunchy top disease (BBTD), they situate women and men within community and long-distance sharing of banana planting material. While both forms of sharing can lead to disease spread, the gendered aspects of how planting material is shared needs to be considered to effectively protect banana crops.

A relational understanding of agrarian transition in Laos is provided by Moglia, Alexander, Larson, (Giger)-Dray, Greenhalgh, Thammavong, Thephavanh, and Case [6]. Lowland rice farmers in Laos are facing both the modernization of agricultural practices as well as diversification into off-farm livelihoods. This article finds that women are more amenable to diversification, partly because traditional farming is controlled by men. The gendering of processes of market-led development thus becomes important for understanding large-scale changes in rural societies.
3. Development Discourses in Women’s Words

The use of certain keywords in development can be usefully questioned in terms of its gendered implications. In this Special Issue, the terms being interrogated include ‘empowerment,’ ‘choice,’ ‘sustainable livelihoods,’ as well as ‘success’, as mentioned in the article by Halim et al. discussed above [1]. Focusing on the concept of empowerment, McOmber, McNamara, Ryley, and McKune [7] highlight the value of delving into local definitions, especially if the aim of development is to address the needs of communities rather than impose definitions from above. Their use of the method of community concept drawing ensures that these local meanings can be analyzed more carefully, and their focus on a wide variety of places—Senegal, Kenya, and Nepal—emphasizes the salience of cultural contextualization.

Polar, Ashby, Thiele, and Tufan [8] challenge the notion that the adoption of a crop variety is a matter of ‘free choice.’ Using examples of crops from regions across Africa, they show that crop traits prioritized in plant breeding often favor the needs of men, reducing women’s likelihood of adopting new crop varieties. Thus, the structuring of ‘choice’ is itself biased in terms of gender, and this has to be considered if gender equity is sought in the adoption of new crop varieties. In the context of neoliberalism, since seed systems are being linked to the intellectual property rights of large companies, there is also a need to promote small farmer-led seed sharing practices. Taken together, the articles on the informal sharing of seeds through gendered networks strongly call for gender-responsive breeding and seed dissemination systems [3,5,8].

Basu and Galié [9] delve into the benefits that Kenya’s smallholders associate with dairy development and interpret these benefits in terms of categories present in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). Both women and men farmers value the income, market access, and improved cattle breeds provided by dairy development, so that the economic sustainability of the program is privileged. However, women’s lack of control over milk income, possible diversion of milk from community consumption, and reluctance to adopt some technologies associated with maintaining improved breeds show that concerns related to social and environmental sustainability are also linked to dairy development.

Overall, the articles in this Special Issue seek to understand how the contextual complexities of gender construction intersect in varied ways with the imperatives of neoliberalism and sustainability. In terms of neoliberal policies, when new opportunities to connect to markets present themselves, women consider whether these will improve household welfare or enable them to chart an independent path to livelihoods, and shape their responses accordingly. Often, women seem to rely on and prefer collaborative models of engagement with the market, thereby providing an alternative discourse to the profit-driven neoliberal agenda. In terms of sustainability, given the gender division of work, women may have a different perspective on household production and consumption than men, which again may shape what they consider is the most suitable set of practices for their household. At the neoliberalism–sustainability conjuncture, gender analysis shows that future livelihood possibilities are not determined by stable identities, practices, and discourses, but by how these are open to being transformed by both development programs and the women and men targeted by development. Therefore, there is a need to question how gender dynamics and women’s work are being incorporated into neoliberal policies and sustainability discourses, and how development approaches on the ground respond to gender-based needs and aspirations. Overall, the articles in this Special Issue highlight the ways in which gender differences and inequalities continue to matter.

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