

Bioversity International's Gender Research Fellowship Programme: Results and ways forward

The overarching goal of Bioversity International's Gender Research Fellowship Programme was to strengthen the capacity of researchers to conduct participatory gender-responsive research in the field of forest genetic resource use and management. The knowledge generated was intended to contribute to developing conservation and management guidelines that are more equitable and effective in their outcomes.

Bioversity International's series of Impact Assessment Briefs aims to inform readers about the major results of evaluations carried out by the centre.

National and international agricultural and forest research organizations often lack capacities in social science research. This limits their ability to deliver locally-relevant outcomes that enhance gender equity and social inclusion in natural resource management.

To address this gap, Bioversity International's Forest Genetic Resources Programme launched the Gender Research Fellowship Programme (GRFP) in April 2013. In 2013-2014, the Programme offered fellowships to five scientists—three women and two men—from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, India, the Kyrgyz Republic and Malaysia. The Fellows' research was integrated into collaborative research projects led by Bioversity International and carried out with local partners as part of the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry.



Fellow Yvonne Kiki Nchanji receiving her certificate of completion from Dr Paul Engels
Credit: Bioversity International/E Hermanowicz

The programme was evaluated in 2015 based on interviews and focus group discussions with the Fellows. These revealed that this pilot fellowship initiative has strengthened capacities and helped to fill gaps in knowledge regarding women's and men's knowledge, skills, access, management and use of tree and forest genetic resources. In addition, the evaluation revealed ways the programme could be improved.

Research topics of the five research Fellows

Burkina Faso	Investigating women's and men's preferences for shea tree ethnovarieties
Cameroon	Women's and men's knowledge, activities, and constraints in the use of non-timber forest products
India	Participatory research to assess the women's and men's knowledge and collective management of native fruit trees in the Central Western Ghats
Kyrgyz Republic	Women's and men's knowledge and markets for fruit trees and products in Kyrgyzstan's walnut forests
Malaysia	Empowering women as experts in tropical fruit tree diversity

Programme Structure

Fellows were recruited through National partner institutes who were co-responsible for mentoring them. National partners were expected to support Fellows with research design and data analysis and to facilitate logistics related to their field work. National mentors accompanied the Fellows at the inception workshop of the GRFP, where Fellows came together with GRFP Coordinators to develop their research proposals and gained knowledge and experience with gender-responsive participatory methods.



Brainstorming at the GRFP closing writeshop
Credit: Bioversity International/E Hermanowicz

GRFP Coordinators, scientists with expertise in gender, provided virtual and in-person co-supervision throughout the programme. At the end of the Programme a write-shop brought together the Fellows and GRFP Coordinators to develop papers and articles for publication. The Programme offered Fellows other professional development opportunities, including participation in international conferences and workshops.

Evaluating the Programme

This evaluation was done during the GRFP's closing write-shop and was complemented by a written survey sent to Fellows one year after the end of the Programme. During a focus group discussion, Fellows provided feedback on the Programme. The survey focused on best practices and areas for potential improvement in the GRFP.

Fellows were asked to evaluate how their participation in the Programme, including interactions with other Fellows and with their host organization, had affected their professional development. All five Fellows participated in the focus group discussion and four of the five completed the survey.

Outcomes: Enhanced research capacities and professional opportunity

The Fellows found that the GRFP had positively affected their professional development and improved their ability to conduct gender-responsive participatory research. The Fellows' self-assessed capacity to carry out gender-responsive research rose from an average score of 2.75/10 at the onset of the Programme to an average of 7.75/10 at the end. Their ability to conduct participatory research similarly rose from 2.75/10 to 7.5/10. Those who completed the survey agreed that the Programme influenced their understanding of how gender issues relate to their work on natural resources and felt that gender-responsive participatory research would help them contribute to positive social transformation.

Asked to evaluate on a sliding scale the GRFP's effects on their professional development and skills—no change, little change, moderate change, great change—at least three of four respondents experienced:

Great change in

- exposure to research methods and approaches
- skills in designing gender-responsive research projects
- ability to collect data in a gender-responsive way
- ability to use participatory tools

Moderate or great change in

- vision of future professional goals
- ability to complete research work
- visibility among professional colleagues in their institution
- academic outputs
- scientific problem solving ability
- suitability for previously out-of-reach positions or opportunities
- capacity to analyze and interpret gender-disaggregated data

The Fellows each reported a 5 point increase or more on a ten-point scale in their ability to write a research article. Specifically, they noted improvements in their skills in writing an introduction, developing an argument, writing about methods and research contexts, organizing data, and reporting and discussing results.

"[The GRFP] changed the way I will henceforth carry out research"
Fellow Yvonne Kiki Nchanji

Best Practices

Experiencing the GRFP as a group created a sense of community. According to the Fellows, the healthy social pressure and exposure to peer support were very positive aspects of the programme. The knowledge they gained through exposure to the different research methods and tools used by other Fellows in their projects was particularly useful.

Below, the results of the Fellows' ranking of the different capacity building elements of the GRFP in terms of their contribution to improving their knowledge and skills in gender-responsive research.

1. Writing research paper
2. Closing write-shop
3. Preparing their presentation for an international conference
4. Inception workshop
5. Field work
6. Reading other Fellows' blogs
7. Field visit of mentors
8. Writing blogs and reports

The inception workshop and closing write-shop were highlighted as highly valuable experiences. These facilitated group interactions, fostered the Fellows' sense of mutual support and helped them form a community of practice.

Although rated last in the survey in terms of a capacity



Fellow Mawa Karambiri with research participant
Credit: Bioversity International/B Vinceti

strengthening activity in the survey, the Fellows cited writing blogs for the Bioversity International website as a best practice. They found writing in the shorter, more informal blog style to be an encouraging exercise that helped them distil the essence of their research findings. The blog writing also inspired creativity that helped when doing the weightier writing required for research articles. Fellows participated in a blog competition organized by the World Agroforestry Congress. They appreciated the element of competition and the visibility their work received through the contest.



Fellow Narasimha Hegde facilitating a participatory exercise with older women

Credit: Bioversity International/E Hermanowicz

"It was useful to write throughout the programme, not only at the end"
Fellow Narasimha Hegde

Programme improvement and future growth

The Fellows' feedback suggests the need for a clarified and expanded role for national mentors at partner institutes. Frustration occurred when mentors were unable or unavailable to serve in an advisory capacity. The involvement of national partners should thus be reinforced to intensify research advising throughout the fellowship term. The advice should consist of guidance for understanding research tools, support in structuring methods for data collection and analysis, and provision of critical commentary for the blog and article writing process. Since the research goals bridge the social and natural sciences, partner institutes would ideally also facilitate the Fellows' access to qualified researchers in both social and biophysical fields of science. This would be facilitated by clear and detailed terms of reference for co-mentors that are formally articulated with their other responsibilities at host institutes.

All of the Fellows found one of the greatest challenges of the research process to be identification of appropriate formats for data collection, organization, and analysis. Several of the Fellows specifically identified the design of data collection protocols as an aspect of the research for which they needed more support. The participatory tools used generate qualitative data that they were unaccustomed to analyzing. They felt they needed a robust

framework to guide their data analysis. Moreover, as most of the Fellows had little previous exposure to social science methods, approaches and the associated literature and concepts, the challenge of writing about social relations proved tremendously challenging and required massive support from the international team of mentors.

The Fellows shared ideas about opportunities for the GRFP's future development. They recommended the addition of a midterm workshop to discuss data organization and analysis and obtain early feedback. In addition they suggested strengthening the comparative character of the research projects to increase opportunities for joint paper writing. Finally, they expressed their willingness to serve as mentors for Fellows in the future.

One option in the future could be to organize the GRFP as a diploma programme, open to students and professionals in research for development. Alternatively, the programme could be offered as a for-credit graduate course where students apply by participating universities in developing countries.

The survey on which this brief is based was designed by M. Fernandez, H. Lamers, R. Jalonen and M. Elias.



Fellows celebrating the end of a successful closing write-shop
Credit: Bioversity International/E Hermanowicz

"From Africa or Asia, young researchers have similar ambitions and career concerns"
Fellow Mawa Karambiri



Contact Us

Marlène Elias
Bioversity International—Malaysia
PO Box 236, UPM Post Office, Serdang
43400 Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
Tel: (603) 89 423 891



Bioversity International is a member of the CGIAR Consortium. CGIAR is a global research partnership for a food secure future. Bioversity International is registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in the US. Bioversity International (UK) is a Registered UK Charity No. 1131854.