Widespread adoption and impact of new crop varieties and animal breeds on resource-poor farms depends on the tangible benefits these provide for the women and men involved in their production, consumption and marketing.

Building Gender Differences into Breeding

For breeders to meet users’ needs, they need to understand the priorities that women and men assign to genetically determined traits. Many CGIAR breeding programs understand that if they overlook traits important to women users, this can aggravate household food insecurity and poverty. But breeding programs still don’t have enough practical methods and tools to help them decide how to be more gender responsive and consider gender differences in breeding schemes.

What can a breeding program do to be gender responsive?

- **Know** when, where and why women are an important beneficiary group. Take into account important differences in constraints faced by women and men farmers that breeding can influence.
- **Anticipate** how design decisions (e.g. plant ideotype and trait prioritization, targeting and testing varieties with farmers) may impact and be influenced by women’s labor, available resources and options.
- **Design** breeding objectives specifically to benefit women farmers when they are an important beneficiary group who require a special approach and consider their needs, constraints and knowledge more generally in the breeding program.
- **Be accountable**, making sure success of the breeding program is measured in ways that include success for women as well as for households or farmers in general.

Tackling this knowledge gap is urgent if CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs) are to achieve the targets for gender equality promised in the CGIAR Strategy and Results Framework. With this in mind, a workshop on Gender, Breeding and Genomics was held last year with support from the CGIAR Gender Network and Gender Action Plan (both of which terminated in December 2016). The workshop concluded that the knowledge and experience exist to construct, in a short time, a clear strategy for gender-responsive breeding with supporting methods, tools and practices. However, this knowledge is scattered in different sectors and disciplines and needs to be connected by a multidisciplinary team effort.

The CGIAR Gender and Breeding Initiative is being launched to pull together this strategy by the group of breeders and social scientists who participated in the 2016 workshop, under the guidance of a Workshop Organizing Committee, with coordination provided by the CRP on Roots, Tubers and Bananas and the International Potato Center. The Gender and Breeding Initiative is designed to share its knowledge across all CGIAR and partner breeding programs in active association with centers, CRPs and the new CGIAR Platforms on Gender, Big Data and Excellence in Breeding.

What’s new about the Initiative?

- Addresses a practical knowledge gap crucial for breeding to have a positive impact on gender equality
- Works short-term on a multidisciplinary task across plant and animal breeding programs of CGIAR and its partners
- Marshalls proven practice from public and private sector breeding

The Initiative is working to:

- Increase the development impact of breeding by recommending practical ways to improve gender-responsiveness
- Develop evidence-based methods and tools for gender responsive targeting, implementation of breeding activities and linkage with variety dissemination
- Support a community of practice for active sharing and development of methods and tools

Strategies for profiling economic and socially significant target groups together with their gender-differentiated trait and product preferences will help breeding programs decide whose preferences deserve attention. Providing tested, practical ways to improve the characterization of traits that are clearly associated with different users’ priorities and preferences will assist breeding programs to understand better which traits deserve incorporation into breeding schemes and which type of varieties or breeds to develop. This is crucial to avoid overloading programs with excessive demands while ensuring vital opportunities are not missed. Of equal importance are studies to uncover the genetic underpinnings for emerging traits, if not yet known, and providing breeding programs with tools and methods to be able to breed for sets of new traits.

The CGIAR Gender and Breeding Initiative will commission a set of input papers around gender and social targeting and setting priorities in breeding. These create the framework for an Innovation Workshop on Gender and Breeding in October 2017. There will be important cross linkages with nine postdoctoral fellows working on gender and breeding. Knowledge sharing and outreach will be based on a series of webinars focusing on the input papers and work of the postdoctoral fellows, along with the development of a website for the initiative.

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