12

Making a difference: integrating gender analysis into PRA training

Irene Guijt

· Introduction

As the most basic tenet of PRA is the need for 'full community participation' in development, it would appear to follow that community diversity is explored rigorously and without questioning. Yet the reality of much PRA fieldwork bears witness to a marked lack of understanding about gender[1] as an important axis of such social diversity. Typically the diagrams that result from a specific discussion will bear a caption such as: *"Village Resource Map, drawn by the villagers of ..."*. Only in very rare cases will these 'villagers' fully represent the diversity of gender, age, class, religion, ethnicity differences of the community in question. Similarly, reports contain statements such as *"Farmers mobilised in planning and layout of erosion measure"*" or *"The community needs more agricultural credit facilities"*. Who are these 'farmers', and who does - and does not - subscribe to this `community need'?

Experiences to date clearly show that PRA is *not* automatically gender-sensitive. The few cases of gender-sensitive participatory development can usually be attributed to the personal commitment of those facilitating the process, rather than to the methodology itself. Those using PRA in the field carry with them personal biases, experiences and agendas, all of which shape the final analysis. Therefore, without a gender-conscious trainer or gender-sensitive trainees, gender issues are not likely to be raised during any subsequent use of PRA by those who have been trained. Moreover, many PRA practitioners continue to think that gender-sensitivity just means consulting women, as well as men. Few have a deeper understanding of what gender means, how it is manifested and how it affects individual development options. Any value which might arise from equal consultation of women and men in a PRA process is lost when the findings disappear into the melting pot of community averages, obscuring any possible gender differences.

· PRA training and gender training

PRA training generally focuses on the principles and practice of an integrated and participatory development process. Concepts that will be explored in most PRA training sessions will include participation, local livelihoods, problems and opportunities. Others often included are sustainability, systems thinking and farmer participatory research. The concepts used will vary, depending on the interests and background of the trainer, the interests of the participants and organisations they represent, and the focus of the fieldwork. The training approach usually includes some theoretical presentations, but focuses on communication skills and specific methods, through exercises, games and group discussions. The overall objective of PRA training is to encourage trainees to develop a more open and less directive communication style, devolving analytical and decision-making power to local people. In most field-

[1] Gender is understood to mean the socially determined differences between women and men, as opposed to the word 'sex' which denotes physical differences. Gender differences are historically-determined, culturally specific and dynamic. They define how in a specific context, women and men interact, and what is considered appropriate for women and men to do, thus determining their development options and constraints.

Source: RRA Notes (1994), Issue 19, pp.49–55, IIED London

based PRA training sessions there are three clear stages:

- *Preparation and Practice* - during which conceptual issues are discussed (including the principles of PRA), specific methods are practised, and preparations made for the fieldwork;

- *Fieldwork* - during which the methods are used to generate a community-level discussion about local problems and opportunities; and,

- *Feedback and Evaluation* - after the fieldwork, finishing off the documentation of the process, reflecting on lessons learnt and future use of PRA, and evaluation of the training.

Reflection is part and parcel of each stage: reflection after the classroom-based practice sessions, reflections on the process and content of each day of fieldwork, reflection on the future use of PRA. Experiences have shown that these three stages are essential for a well-balanced perception by the trainees of the potential and limitations of PRA.

For PRA training which focuses on rural development and agriculture, Phase I commonly deals with concepts such as livelihoods, farming systems, sustainability, and participation. Yet rarely is the question of *whose* livelihood, *whose* farming system, *whose* perception of sustainability, and *who* participates, discussed sufficiently. Many trainers mention once or twice that *"Of course it is important to remember that not all people think the same"*. But the issue of social differences based on gender is rarely explored with rigour throughout the training process.

By comparison, the overall objective of gender training is to raise awareness on what gender is and is not, what personal perceptions trainees hold of gender differences, how gender differences manifest themselves at the local level, and how this influences personal development. The concepts common to much gender training include:

- gender relations of power (Krishnamurthy, 1993);

- triple gender roles: productive, reproductive and community-managing activities carried out by women and men (Moser, 1989);

- position and condition of women, and related practical and strategic gender needs and interests (Molyneux, 1985); and,

- access to and control over resources (Overholt et al, 1985).

Gender training usually comprises theoretical readings, case study analysis, personal reflections, and simulation exercises.

Over the last two years there has been a slow growth in the number of attempts to improve the practice of PRA by allowing gender issues to shape both the practical work and the analysis (Welbourn, 1991, 1992; Guijt, 1993, 1994; Thomas Slayter et al, 1991,1993; Shah, 1993; Cousins et al, 1993). In December 1993 about 60 people attended a PRA and Gender workshop organised by IIED and the Institute for Development Studies[2]. The range of experiences show that the combination of PRA and gender has been used in:

- research: to conduct gender-differentiated analysis; and,

- community development: to strive for gender-balanced development and/or support the empowerment of women.

In the training context, introducing gender as an analytical concept has encouraged a clearer appreciation by trainees of the relative marginalisation of most women. This limits the danger of fieldworkers falling into the trap of the community average, which assumes harmony and consistency of perspectives within the community. However, there is little thorough documentation on how gender and PRA can be integrated systematically into a training programme. It is essential that gender is part of each stage. Simply dropping a definition of gender on a hand-out and saying 'Remember that this is important' is not

[2] Information about the presentations and discussions can be obtained from the Sustainable Agriculture Programme at IIED.

Source: RRA Notes (1994), Issue 19, pp.49–55, IIED London

enough to guarantee a clear understanding of what gender means in concrete terms.
The implications of integrating gender into a training session will include introducing specific concepts early on, and continual reflection about the relevance of these specific concepts at each stage of the training. The fieldwork stage of training is an essential step in the learning process of trainees, when ideas about PRA are consolidated and new working habits take shape. If gender is to become a concrete and meaningful concept for PRA trainees, then those who are learning to work with PRA will need to become aware of gender before any fieldwork takes place. The fieldwork can then clarify and strengthen their conceptual understanding.

· A Brazilian example of PRA and gender training

A gender-sensitive PRA goes much further than simply involving women in the fieldwork. It uses concepts such as the triple gender roles, gender relations, and practical and strategic gender needs to understand the local analysis that takes place during a PRA. One example of how, in a training context, gender was integrated with PRA, comes from recent work in southern Brazil (Guijt, 1994). The training was attended by 12 participants and had two overall objectives:

- To strengthen their participatory work with a theoretical and practical understanding of PRA; and,

- To explore the relevance of gender with fieldworkers working with sustainable agriculture NGOs.

In the classroom-based discussions and during the fieldwork, a series of steps were followed in order to develop a gender-sensitive understanding of the rural community in which the fieldwork was taking place.

Classroom-based preparations

The classroom-based preparations included three steps in which gender-specific issues were addressed. First, a sequence of exercises and discussions were carried out by the participants to help them define gender and to draw out a conceptual understanding of gender-differentiated rural livelihoods. At this stage, analytical concepts such as productive and reproductive activities, and practical and strategic gender needs were introduced. After each PRA exercise practised in the classroom, the potential relevance of the method for understanding gender issues was discussed.

Second, during the preparations for the fieldwork, the participants specified their initial checklist by formulating key questions in terms of gender-differentiated perspectives. For example, they explored 'who uses which resources and why', and not simply 'use of resources'.

Finally, the participants identified which methods would be most appropriate to explore each question and determined whether they would apply each method with separate groups of women and men, or only with men or only with women. Discussions had been held before the training started, with both the men and the women of the community, about their willingness to work together with the teams during the PRA fieldwork. Convenient times for meeting with women and men had been established on which the trainees based their preparations.

Fieldwork

During the fieldwork, several other stages followed to generate site-specific information about the abstract notions that were explored in the classroom. First, the teams used different methods with separate groups of women and men, during which they probed explicitly for gender issues and local problems and opportunities. This was not always easy. Direct questions, such as 'who decides about expenditure', tended to provoke heated discussions and initial suspicion of motives of the trainees. One lesson learnt by the trainees was that exploration of gender issues requires sensitive communication skills. Each evening the teams shared:

- the problems raised by the local community, differentiated by gender. They also identified gender issues, such as 'women are more sick than men' and 'women participate less in meetings of the community association than men', 'men

Source: RRA Notes (1994), Issue 19, pp.49–55, IIED London

had more understanding of agricultural marketing links than women'. These were identified from the discussions held and the diagrams made.

- who in the community had raised each issue (only men, only women, both, only a particular group of men/women/both, etc), or if it was raised by one of the team members; and,

- analysis of problems, why they were raised, how they were raised (directly or indirectly, with ease or with difficulty), and whether these represented shared opinions or only those of the vocal majority.

Classroom-based reflection on fieldwork

After the fieldwork, the lessons learnt and issues explored were consolidated. This was done in several ways:

- reflection on key questions about the links between gender and the environment;

- discussion about gender issues raised locally;

- revisiting the key gender analysis concepts, such as productive and reproductive activities, and practical and strategic gender needs, in the light of the common experience of the fieldwork;

- discussion of the implications that the gender-differentiated understanding of local livelihoods brings to project planning by reviewing several ongoing interventions in the light of their emphasis on 'productive or reproductive activities' and what they meant for 'practical' or 'strategic' gender interests. For example, the medicinal plant project coordinated by the NGO only involved women and reinforced women's reproductive role by making it easier for them to care for sick family members. Yet it was able to address both women's practical and strategic needs by meeting their immediate need for free medicine, and strengthening women's networking in the community and their understanding of health rights.

This example shows only one approach to mainstreaming gender into PRA. How this is carried out will depend on the trainer's understanding of PRA and of gender, the background of the trainees, the cultural context and the time allocated for training.

· Reaping the benefits... and seeing the dangers

The usual arguments that are used to justify the need to integrate gender into any planning process also hold for PRA. Equitable impact of development is enhanced by putting the views, areas of knowledge, and strategies of women back into the picture. It can help to recognise possible conflicts, complementarities or coincidences in interests between women and men (Rocheleau, 1990). Understanding these issues have important implications for planning, which can build on any complementarities and try to avoid conflict. Efficiency and appropriateness of subsequent action is likely to be enhanced if `full community participation' is genuine.

Another benefit that PRA offers is the opportunity to use field-based training as a non-threatening approach to gender-awareness training. Seeing and listening is believing for those who do not know the very real significance of gender differences at the local level. As Welbourn (1991) writes, fieldworkers learn:

> *"to recognise that communities are not homogenous, passive blobs...[and] that those in the village who attend meetings are in fact normally those who expect to gain most from our assistance..."*.

She presented gender to the trainees alongside age, material well-being and ethnicity as a package of 'axes of difference', thereby defusing any fear of rampant feminism that is so often associated with gender training. She says that:

> *"fieldworkers were able to see for themselves that differences do exist within communities... and that to omit any one factor .. is to limit our understanding of that community's needs"*.

Source: RRA Notes (1994), Issue 19, pp.49–55, IIED London

By exposing trainees to the gender-differentiated versions of reality that a gender-sensitive PRA can generate, gender becomes more meaningful than if they had just read a theoretical text on the issue (Mukherjee, 1993). Experiential learning might well be a more effective approach to gender training, than one which rests on dry, intellectual understanding.

While it is essential that gender is taken more seriously in the context of PRA, a few reservations should be mentioned. It is just as easy to fall into the trap of the 'gender average' (assuming harmony and homogeneity amongst women or amongst men) as that of a 'community average'. Gender differences should, therefore, be considered together with other aspects of social difference. Local understanding of gender, and gender differences, should be explored. This can be done, for example, by looking at gender issues within local proverbs, songs and stories (ACORD, 1993). Gender differences should perhaps not be presumed to be significant in all situations for everyone (Cornwall, 1992). The interaction between various aspects of difference needs further exploration. Perhaps in some settings, being a woman might not be as significant as being of a particular ethnic group. The most fundamental challenge is raised about our personal notions of gender. Cornwall (1992) says that:

> *"Our ideas about gender - whether they are those of the sexist patriarch or the committed feminist- are biases. It is important that we suspend judgement and facilitate local people in offering us their versions, their experiences and their analyses of difference rather than wading in with our own agendas".*

Nonetheless, these reflections on the limitations of enshrining gender as an analytical concept and an organising principle should not be seen as a way out of discussing gender altogether. The danger of imposing an ethnocentric (i.e. Northern) understanding of gender on other cultures is often used as an excuse used to avoid addressing gender and to continue in what is generally a male-biased approach. Cultural sensitivity never seems to be a difficult issue where other socio-economic differences, such as class or ethnicity, are concerned. For example, few are worried about upsetting the 'haves' through income-generation activities aimed at indebted clients. Conversely, many are not averse to strengthening the position of the 'haves' through their interventions.

· Gender relations at the community level

Making development workers more gender-sensitive is one thing, but dealing with gender issues *at the community level by community members* is something else altogether. The first might lead to more gender-balanced development in the sense of not marginalising women and implementation of appropriate projects. But adopting a participatory approach to challenge and change power relations between women and men is quite another area (Krishnamurthy, 1993), and one which is poorly documented. Meena Bilgi writes an intriguing account of how she was able to overcome the initial resistance of local men to initiating labour-saving projects for women by using PRA (Bilgi, 1992).

How best could PRA be an effective approach for discussing gender issues at the local level, and identifying (and possibly resolving) inherent or emergent conflicts in the process? This might entail a confrontation between local women and men about issues of power and autonomy. Before embarking on such a venture, it is essential to consider *why* such a confrontation is considered necessary and what the expected impact might be. Without careful consideration of this question, and the capacity and willingness to deal with the follow-up, the entire process might be counter-productive and disempower those who are supposed to benefit from the process.

No two-or three-week training can overturn the thinking of a lifetime (Welbourn, 1991). Yet by not addressing issues of social difference, including gender, in the context of PRA in a serious and systematic manner, PRA training and subsequent practice may well serve to reinforce the thinking of a lifetime. I would greatly welcome hearing of other experiences about the pros and cons of integrating gender and participatory development in training.

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- **Irene Guijt**, Sustainable Agriculture Programme, IIED, London.

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