

# Integrating gender in research and institutions: lessons from the Innovation Lab for Food Security Policy Research, Capacity, and Influence

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## 1. Introduction

Advancing gender integration within food policy research, project cycles, and organizations is important to effectively influence food security policy and achieve food security and social inclusion (Njenga et al. 2011). A recent review of evidence highlights the importance of addressing gender inequality and promoting women's empowerment for food system outcomes, such as household food security and children's nutrition (Njuki et al. 2022; Quisumbing et al. 2023). Thus, food security policy research that identifies enabling factors and approaches to increase gender equality and facilitate women's empowerment can help ensure an equitable food system transformation. Addressing gender biases in research processes and in innovation systems is important in its own right and to complement women's empowerment in the food system (McGuire et al. 2022).

The Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Food Security Policy Research, Capacity, and

### Key Messages

1. PRCI was successful at sensitizing researchers about the importance of integrating gender in research.
2. Capacity development by the PRCI team on gender was found to be "useful" and "necessary" to integrate gender into research.
3. Remaining challenges to integrate gender in research include limited availability of sex-disaggregated data, limited gender expertise, and limited resources for gender-focused research.
4. Integrating gender in institutional practice is more challenging as it requires strong leadership and political will.
5. Future efforts to integrate gender should include integrating gender at the proposal development stage, ensuring research teams include gender experts, identifying gender focal points within partner centers, and greater funding and longer timeframes to enable collection of sex-disaggregated data.



Influence (PRCI<sup>1</sup>) seeks to enhance the ability of applied policy research centers across Africa and Asia to conduct high quality food security policy research and influence food security policy more effectively. Given the importance of gender for equitable food security outcomes and food system transformation, one of the key objectives of PRCI is to raise partner centers' capacities to integrate gender into their food policy research and to communicate gender-related research results, leading to greater policy influence. PRCI also encouraged partners to reflect on gender equality issues in their research and institutional processes.

In 2023, PRCI commissioned an assessment of the effectiveness of PRCI's approach to integrate gender, with the purpose of understanding the extent to which this approach influenced awareness and knowledge of gender issues and practices to integrate gender into research and organizational processes in PRCI partner centers. The assessment relied on qualitative interviews with representatives of partner centers. Interviews were conducted with 23 researchers from 9 of the policy research centers. The assessment also drew on discussions during a session at PRCI Global Gathering in Ghana during April, 2023, that solicited feedback from partners on their experiences, learning, and remaining constraints to integrate gender as well as their reflections on PRCI's approach. This brief brings this work together to reflect on the key enablers and constraints to integrating gender in research and institutional practices.

## 2. Gender integration activities

PRCI used multiple approaches to pursue its objectives, consistent with the local capacity strengthening principle of "strengthen(ing) diverse capacities through diverse approaches"<sup>2</sup>. These included research mentoring in which teams of researchers from participating centers were matched with mentors from MSU, Cornell University, and IFPRI to conduct analysis and write a policy relevant research paper; online training in a variety of topics; a research-to-policy (R2P) program in which researchers were trained on conceiving research topics with policy relevance in mind and in translating research findings into messages useful to policy makers; and institutional capacity strengthening. PICA—the Policy Influence Capacity Advancement (PICA) Process—was PRCI's most comprehensive approach to institutional capacity strengthening and was applied with ISRA-BAME, EPRC, and PiLAF.

The PRCI gender team worked to integrate gender into all these components of PRCI. This started with technical trainings focused on basic gender concepts, definitions, and theoretical issues. Then, based on feedback from participants, trainings covered practical issues and topics related to the research that partners were working on, such as integrating gender into value chain research. Over time, a more demand-driven and collaborative approach was used, involving gender experts from the partner institutes in the design and delivery of the trainings. The goal of PRCI was to increase appreciation and capacity to address gender, because most researchers involved in the project were not gender researchers.

<sup>1</sup> PRCI is led by Michigan State University (MSU) in collaboration with ANAPRI (Africa Network of Agriculture Policy Research Institutes), ISSER (Institute for Statistical, Social, and Economic Research - Ghana), IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute), and Cornell University. PRCI core partners in Africa are: l'Institut Sénégalais de Recherches Agricoles/Bureau d'Analyses Macro-Économiques (ISRA-BAME), Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) in Uganda, and Innovation Lab for Policy Leadership in Agriculture and Food Security (PiLAF) in Nigeria. PRCI has also worked with other ANAPRI-affiliated centers in Africa and with six centers across Southeast Asia and South Asia.

<sup>2</sup> Principle #2 in [USAID's local capacity strengthening policy](#).



Gender was also integrated into PICA. This included carrying out a gender audit to identify capacity gaps and assets in the three centers that participated in the PICA process. The results of the audit were presented to partner centers during the initial meetings between these centers and the PICA team to highlight areas where gender research and practices may be strengthened. The gender team also engaged with PRCI's R2P team, to help partners think about how to integrate gender in their approach to policy engagement and communicate gender-related research results. Finally, gender researchers were also paired with research teams that expressed interest in deepening gender research in their work.

### 3. Center engagements and experiences with PRCI

Results of the assessment showed generally broader acceptance of the importance of integrating gender in research following PRCI training and engagement. Many participants expressed greater appreciation for the need to explore gender issues through their research following the engagement. Despite this, few research teams integrated gender in meaningful ways in their research activities. Even less progress was made to change institutional practices to address gender biases or promote gender equity.

#### Awareness of the importance of gender as a result of PRCI engagement

There is a wide range of views on the importance of gender across centers and among individual researchers within the centers. Some partners felt that gender was “not a problem in their organizations and societies” while others felt gender issues were important to address. Some researchers assessed that their centers had only basic capacity to engage in gender research with little to no gender expertise on staff, while other organizations had more advanced gender research activities and researchers who were conversant with more advanced approaches, referencing “gender responsive” and “gender transformative” approaches.

*“There is value in tracking how gender is evolving...and what are the emerging challenges and how we address them.”*

During the session on gender at the 2023 Global Gathering, participants acknowledged that the PRCI design made the gender component explicit, changing perspectives and understanding on how gender integration can be improved. Among the most frequently mentioned insights from participating in PRCI's gender integration activities included a greater understanding of gender concepts. For example, partners gained an understanding that gender involves not just women but refers to the relations between men and women, and how gender intersects with other social identities. Partners also expressed an understanding of how different development initiatives, policies, and actions (or inactions) may differently affect men and women. It was also noted that gender roles are influenced by social and cultural norms, which are dynamic and, thus, gender roles are also subject to change.

Other partners described how PRCI influenced a change in perspectives and attitudes on the importance of focusing on gender in agricultural research for development. They emphasized that gender integration is a process, rather than a single point-in-time activity. Partners also appreciated the diverse skillset and knowledge required to integrate gender and emphasized that conducting gender research within a multi-disciplinary team is key.





## Feedback on trainings

All core centers and selected ANAPRI member centers found the gender trainings to be “useful” and “necessary.” Participants especially appreciated the [gender trainings](#) that provided practical examples of how to integrate gender into research—like a rubric for using mixed-methods, and the reach-benefit-empower-transform framework. They also found trainings that integrated more participatory and interactive approaches, such as breakout groups, to be more engaging. While some participants seemed to prefer trainings with a more practical and applied focus, many were not conversant with the fundamental concepts covered in the basic gender training, and this limited their ability to follow the more applied trainings.

In January, 2024, 40 participants from centers in Africa attended the last gender training on “[Beyond Add Women and Stir: Effective Proposal Writing for Gender-Related Research](#)”. Of the 13 participants who responded to a post-training survey, 12 said they are extremely likely to use the approaches covered in the trainings in future work. Many participants agreed that the training provided them with more insight into what gender research entails. Participants reported the training being most useful to learn about the definition of gender, various tools that can be used for gender analysis, such as the and the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), and what to consider when applying for gender-related funding opportunities. One participant highlighted that they gained greater clarity on “*what to consider when applying for gender-related funding opportunities.*” Some participants expressed that future trainings should allow more time for discussions that might help consolidate ideas, and a preference for more in-person meetings.

*“The layout of the entire training was very interesting and insightful. I learned a lot from the video and the panel, as they explained many things that I was unaware of.”*

## Integrating gender in research and institutional practices

**Research:** During the PICA gender audit, a majority of respondents from the 3 participating centers reported that their centers conducted gender-focused research, had gender experts on staff, collected sex-disaggregated data, and had access to training and tools. While many of the proposals submitted to PRCI by research teams did not include a strong focus on gender, many of the research papers that were ultimately published had some level of sex-disaggregated analysis—such as a paper on maize traders and shocks in Nigeria and a paper on consumption of fruits and vegetables in Senegal. Most of this research focused on differences between men and women heads of households, given limited availability of sex-disaggregated data and limited budgets and timeframes to do primary data collection under PRCI. The limitations of comparing men and women heads of households could be overcome in future research with primary data collection, if researchers follow the lessons from the training on gender concepts.

PRCI paired gender researchers from the Lab with research teams that submitted proposals with a strong focus on gender. This enabled more sustained engagement on gender around specific research products. Through this engagement one research team used qualitative methods and applied new analytical qualitative data analysis techniques through this engagement. Reflecting on this experience, one researcher noted that “*This was my first experience using mixed methods for gender research, where we applied a new methodology and new software, NVIVO. This was very positive.*” More longer-term engagements with research teams are needed to support greater gender integration in research among partner centers.



**Institutional practice:** A large majority of gender audit respondents felt they had equal access to services, training, and professional development in their center; and that there was gender equality in remuneration. A majority of respondents also agreed to a moderate or great extent that there was a positive working environment for women in their organization. The audit showed room for improvement through more written gender policies, childcare and dependent leave policies, and stated gender equality goals.

There were no significant structural and organizational changes in gender practices within partner institutes specifically attributed to PRCI. Some members of partner research institutes reported more intention to change organizational practices. Some institutions reported the existence of a gender policy, but more awareness is needed to publicize the contents of the policy to staff. In staff recruitment, there was a conscious effort to recruit both men and women in one of the partner centers, while two others did not make any significant changes in organizational practice or research practice.

Ensuring that top management of the PRCI participating centers is involved in the organizational capacity development on gender is key. This produces different results from developing the capacity of project staff and/or gender officers only, as the latter may not have the mandate to integrate throughout the organization. Starting with gender integration in research can create the basis for institutional change over time to enable organizational behavior change and leadership towards gender mainstreaming.

## 4. Key constraints to integrating gender

The assessment revealed that the most common challenge to further integrate gender in research and institutional practice remained the lack of both individual and institutional capacities.

### Research challenges

Overall, the trainings on fundamental gender concepts, particular tools such as WEAI and gender value chain analysis, and approaches to integrating gender in proposals, research design, and presentations for policy influence were an important first step in integrating gender. However, limited capacity to carry out gender-focused research remains a constraint. In particular, there remains limited capacity to identify appropriate indicators and analyze sex disaggregated data, as well as capacity to communicate gender issues and gender-related research findings. Some participants also noted that mainstream data collection practices did not include collecting sex-disaggregated data. This prevents deeper analysis of gender issues and dynamics in research. Researchers also discussed the need for more advanced analytical tools on gender (including analysis of gender-differentiated vulnerability and power dynamics). As a participant from one center noted, there is a need to keep up with *“the evolution in gender tools and analytical approaches to be able to capture the gender dynamics”*. Further, many researchers mentioned limited funding for gender research including from the donor community.

### Institutional challenges

Integrating gender at the organizational level was found to be even more challenging. Unfavorable attitudes about gender integration in research processes linger, such as the misconception that all women are gender specialists, gender is only prioritized by women researchers, gender research is seen as extra work, and the lack of appreciation of gender by top management in some organizations. Participants also mentioned lack of operational capacity, with need for more staffing with capability to implement gender-related practices.





Researchers who participated in PRCI reported integrating gender within their sphere of influence—typically in their own research activities. However, these researchers may not be able to readily influence issues such as staffing, organizational structures, policies, practices, culture, and norms. These types of changes require understanding and commitment by organizational leadership.

While partner centers did not attribute any changes in gender integration practices at the organizational level to PRCI, they pointed to other drivers, such as national policies and the institutional environment, that play an important role in gender mainstreaming. For example, one researcher from a partner center in Asia noted that the Executive Director’s early career included gender training. Consequently, he makes efforts to integrate gender into research processes and management where possible. This included revamping the institute’s gender policy, establishing a harassment committee, improving the gender balance of the governance council, and including a gender lens in several research projects.

In one of the African partner centers, gender integration in reporting and proposal writing was not considered donor dependent, since the government placed more emphasis on gender sensitivity and gender awareness, thus creating an incentive for organizations to prioritize gender issues. Yet, an example from a center in Asia shows that gender quotas are not sufficient to achieve gender parity in leadership. While this center has a gender policy enabling and facilitating the promotion of women to management and leadership positions, additional support is required to improve the skills and capacity of women leaders. Thus, the policy needs to be coupled with specific capacity development programs for women managers and leaders to improve their technical and leadership skills for meaningful gender integration, particularly in contexts where there are few women in leadership.

## 5. Strengthening the PRCI approach – way forward

Through the multiple gender-related activities in PRCI, partner centers gained greater appreciation of the importance of integrating gender in research, and more awareness and understanding of gender concepts, indicators, and research approaches. In centers with (often few) researchers with gender expertise, the PRCI team collaborated to involve them in implementing trainings and other gender-related activities. However, wide variability in capacities related to gender across partner organizations—some with significant gender research skills and some with limited understanding of gender issues—made it difficult to strike the right balance in trainings.

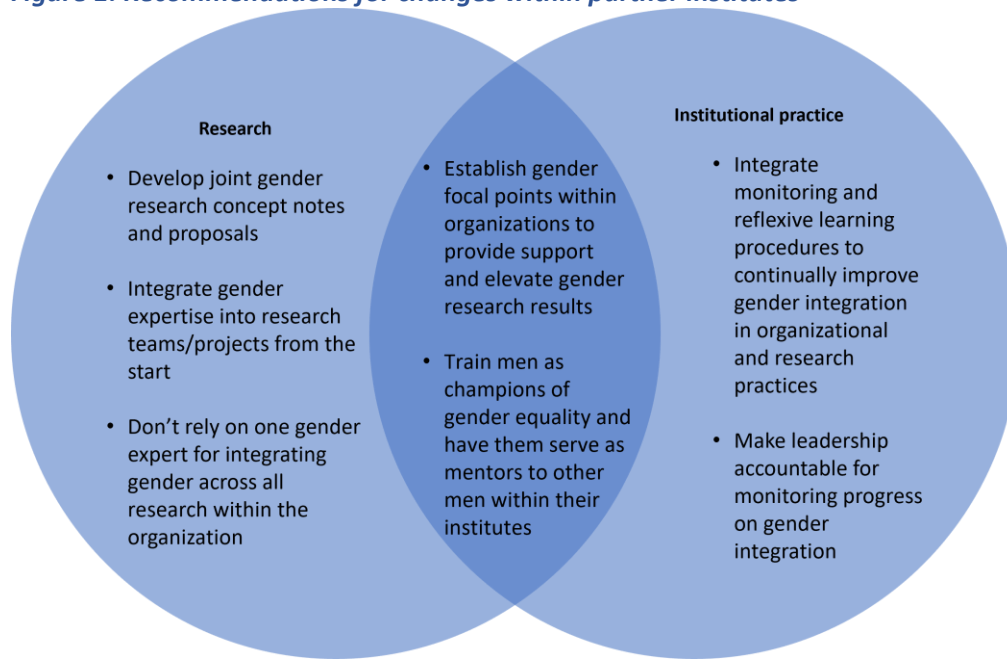
The fact that the assessment showed no significant organizational changes that could be attributed to PRCI is not surprising, given that more of PRCI’s efforts were focused on building capacity for gender research. While the gender audit results were presented under PICA, and the gender team participated in workshops where partners developed their capacity development plans, none of the partners prioritized gender issues in these plans.

Many recommendations emerged through interviews with researchers to facilitate the centers’ gender integration. These include actions on the research side and on the organizational level in terms of institutional practices, with solutions that intersect both fronts (Figure 1).

The PRCI gender integration process itself can also be improved. For example, it is important to ensure that partner organizations have the support or capacity to engage in gender research. If there is no expertise on the local staff, research teams could be paired with mentors or other partners to bring this expertise. PRCI did use a mentored approach in all its research, but not all mentors had gender expertise. PRCI could also solicit research topics that explicitly focus on gender or integrate gender-related research objectives into the overall focus.



**Figure 1: Recommendations for changes within partner institutes**



Moving from presentations of gender concepts and theories to more practical examples of projects and tools, such as the reach-benefit-empower-transform framework and the WEAI, helped make PRCI technical trainings more tangible for non-gender researchers. Revisiting key gender concepts is still needed in each gender training given that not all researchers may have participated in the basic gender training and some are new to the topic. The training approach can further evolve from one-off technical trainings to more sustained capacity development, including more long-term collaborations with research teams that incorporate a gender focus.

Providing translation for those with limited English capacity during training and other engagements is helpful. Further, in-person training is preferred for more effective uptake of best practices and tools for gender research, though there are tradeoffs with the number of people who can benefit, given resource constraints. Finally, working with research teams to develop strong proposals for gender-related research and allowing more time and funding to collect primary sex-disaggregated data to enable deeper gender analysis is key.

Building on the partnership and past collaborations, future efforts at gender integration should focus on:

- Ensuring that calls for proposals require meaningful attention to gender and working with research teams to strengthen gender in PRCI research proposals.
- Expand training to include integrating gender into all proposals and writing strong gender-focused proposals, and working with teams to develop new concept notes. This may include collectively developing joint proposals among partners in the PRCI and ANAPRI network.
- Continuing to strengthen collaboration with gender experts in the partner centers to co-implement trainings and other gender-related activities.
- Engaging in longer collaborations between PRCI gender experts and research teams within the partner centers on selected research papers to ensure gender issues and research methods are well integrated.



- Seeking longer timeframes and additional funding to collect sex-disaggregated data to enable deeper gender analysis, while encouraging use of existing sex-disaggregated datasets.
- Focusing on training of trainers to scale capacity development through the network of research institutes (e.g. ANAPRI).
- Identifying gender focal points and champions for gender equality within research institutes. This includes supporting men to become gender champions.
- Partnering with organizations experienced in integrating gender into institutional processes and leadership development to complement the existing training focus of integrating gender in research.

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## Links to training materials

Module 1: [Integrating Gender in Policy Research and Outreach](#)

Module 5: [How \(and Why\) to Address Gender in Value Chain Studies](#)

Module 6: [Influencing Policy in Gender Research: Panel Discussion on Influential Policy Research](#)

Module 14: [Integrating Mixed Methods in Research](#)

Module 23: [Implementing Indicators of Reach, Benefit, and Empowerment](#)

Module 37: [Integrating gender into research and development projects](#)

Module 38: [Presenting Gender Research](#)

Module 42: [Beyond Add Women and Stir: Effective Proposal Writing for Gender-related Research](#)

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