

Blog / Article

### *A Cup of Gender Analysis with your Next Coffee*

What does a “gender-based analysis” consist of? I went to Huila, Colombia in mid-July, 2014 to undertake just such a feat in several coffee farming communities.

A quick google search will result in a number of GBA definitions that present a contradiction - They are at once comprehensive and vague. For example, while Canada’s [Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development](#) states that gender analysis is a “variety of methods used to understand the relationships between men and women, their access to resources, their activities, and the constraints they face,” a [Sussex University report](#) several years earlier defined it as “the systematic gathering and examination of information on gender differences and social relations in order to identify, understand and redress inequities based on gender.” If you’re addressing university undergraduates these definitions are fine, but what if you want to define this concept to a room full of farmers and engage them in meaningful conversations about these issues in another language? I found out that it becomes a much trickier undertaking altogether.

But let me back up and provide you with some context:

My colleague at The North-South Institute, Pablo Heidrich and I, are implementing a capacity building project in Colombian coffee producing communities. As part of the project, I booked a 10-day trip to Huila, Colombia for a series of workshops and interviews with 20+ farmers of varying socioeconomic status – mostly quite low. While most of the farmers I met were landowners, virtually all Colombian coffee farmers own less than 5 hectares – who in turn are supported by the labour of the landless workers. For our project’s purposes, I wanted to assess the power relations between male and female farmers, especially around work and export-related practices. (For a summary of the project, visit the [NSI website](#)).

Luckily, we had the tremendously competent support of a team of Colombian researchers with the Universidad de los Andes - possibly the country’s most reputable university – to help us with our field work. In their opinion, heading into a week-long rural workshop by providing a “Gender 101” presentation was going about it the wrong way: what we really needed to do was break the ice and get the Colombian farmers talking about their daily lives. In this way, important insights about the power dynamics we were searching for would come up in conversation without our GBA definitions biasing their opinions from the get-go.

In the end, the participatory workshops and small focus group sessions that my Colombian research colleagues and I facilitated with female and male farmers crystalized around three themes: 1) farming practices, 2) social/ family issues, and 3) levels of participation in cooperatives and community-based organizations. A range of simple activities (charting the agricultural calendar, mapping the family and family relationships, creating a table of farming practices, disaggregated by sex, etc.) were introduced at each session, to facilitate the flow of conversation and dialogue. Flip charts and notebooks were filled out. Photos were taken. And while many expressed their opinion on women’s economic empowerment (and lack thereof) during the week of workshops, no one embarked on a presentation defining equality.

The truth is - they didn’t need it.

The women I met were better off, relatively speaking, than I had expected before arriving: First, they were landowners or the wives of landowners producing coffee and other agricultural crops and they

were literally the backbone of the farm's productivity. Due to the legacy of the civil conflict in Colombia, many women landowners are making a mark in the export sector. (About a quarter of the coffee grown in Huila and our project's two other target regions - Cauca and Nariño - is produced on women-owned farms.) Second, these women were selected to participate in the workshops by the National Coffee Federation, so they had already somewhat made a name for themselves, and were part of a local or regional network. Third, they had received (explicit or implicit) agreement from their spouses to attend our work, so they knew how to advocate for themselves. All my (conscious or unconscious) preconceptions about rural Colombian women – as uneducated, tending toward the private sphere, etc. - were effectively debunked.

The experience pointed out to me, yet again, that I should try harder to take off my 'northern hat' before embarking on field missions to foreign countries.

Boarding my Air Canada flight back to Ottawa (a 10 hour trip via Toronto), a few other thoughts came to mind, including:

- Unpacking the composite parts of gender equality is necessarily wrought with difficulty.

Take the example of women's "access to resources" as one of the Canadian government's criteria in their definition of gender-based analysis. One woman I met certainly had access to a number of resources that enable her sell her beans at local markets. Take her family's motorcycle, for example. This piece of information may have lead me to conclude that she has reliable access to different markets that will buy her beans at competitive prices. On the flip side, however, her decision to use the bike may include several conditions, such as her husband's preferred travel times, the other family members who depend on the bike for transportation, the cost of fuel that week, etc. In other words, ownership of the bike does not allow for reliable access to that resource, which in turn, supports the family's livelihood. Of course, any researcher engaged in qualitative studies needs to make some compromises as to the fulfilment of indicators. Yet it seems to me that gender equality is one of those areas that are particularly hard to pin point (see last bullet point). Luckily, my team was working from existing framework for our GBA, from a sectoral perspective.

- One's understanding of inequality depends on one's geographic and cultural location.

As a Canadian working in Colombia without a regional office, I had held several initial meetings earlier this year in order to flesh out a work plan and gain my bearings. Not surprisingly, I learned that there is a huge difference between urban and rural Colombians' views. One of the things that I heard again and again from professionals in Bogota when I brought up gender equality was that "machismo" was really out of control in rural areas. i.e. Women are still subordinate to the men in their lives - either their husband or common law spouse.

When I spent some time with the rural women in Huila, however, I found that their concerns differed considerably. They seemed most concerned about learning how to better control the quality of their coffee beans, about how to participate in further trainings (capacitaciones), and about their children's future livelihood – certainly all laudable concerns. While I don't want to suggest that machismo isn't still a reality facing many women in Latin America, the Huilense women didn't beat an eyelash about whether or not they needed to negotiate their daily decisions in conjunction with their husbands. This was simply a given, so they didn't waste mental energy on it – focusing on other challenges that require

their attention. In short, the rural participants had a very different cultural reference point for prioritizing social concerns, as compared to their urban counterparts.

- To farmers, the process seems to be of equal value as the project results.

In contrast to expecting something in return for their participation in our project, the farmers (men and women) both seemed intent on the intrinsic value of participating in our meetings and expressing their views. As with many other cultures outside North America, inclusion in a network is highly valued (i.e. the relations are what matters - whether social or professional). In this case, participating in public discussions about women's rights and equality as they relate to agricultural labour, was something to be proud of. One of the most memorable moments of the week, to my mind, was listening to some farmers congratulate a woman for her attendance at that day's session - I later learned that she had 6 children and it was her first experience at a workshop of any kind.

- Logistics matter when seeking the full participation of women

For example, during the second day some women announced they needed to leave at 4pm instead of 5:30 pm to catch a more direct bus home. They were told that they would miss discussing one of the three project themes by one of my colleagues. The response? Not only would they get home in time to feed their kids if they leave at 4 pm but staying later might mean a ride home in the dark on the (fairly risky) rural highway. Needless to say, they left early! While some of my Colombian colleagues were distressed, I assured them I wasn't upset that all my agenda boxes weren't being checked off. I *did* emphasize that we shouldn't forget those concerns, however – so that we don't limit any woman's full ability to participate next time!

- “Irrelevance” of gender equality a constant struggle to de-bunk

In undertaking a sectoral gender analysis in southern Colombia, I was constantly reminded of the diverse array of other concerns that gender issues touch on. Whether we were talking about violations of labour law or children's rights, ethnic discrimination, or access barriers to resources (such as potable water or land), biological sex often figured as but one additional constraint facing women. Yet it was easy to get off topic, particularly as the workshops had a flexible format.

Walking the line between relevant and irrelevant topics can certainly be a tricky job – one that might need some prior thought if time is severely limited. Deciding on what issues it's best to avoid can be helpful. One side topic that came up again and again in rural Colombia was the civil conflict, for instance. While it is clearly an overarching criteria governing the region's chances of economic progress, the topic was so highly politicized (and complex) that when it came up I would try to guide the participants back to the equality topic as fast as possible. In addition to knowing what not to talk about, it helps to know how to highlight the importance of the agenda you want to advance – and that people can speak in general terms instead of personal terms, so they don't feel singled out.

One last thought for your coffee break:

I am convinced that the relationships between men and women underpin a larger story about how to build socioeconomic well-being – and the coffee farming communities I visited in Colombia were no exception. I have come away from this experience with renewed respect for the rural men and women

that continue to rely on Colombia's fifth largest export market for their livelihood, despite the inherent risks in trading a global commodity that last year's farm protests illustrated all too well.