Focus: Gender and Equity

Highlight 3: Analyzing Equity in Agriculture, Nutrition, and Health Research

To understand what is needed to tackle different aspects of inequity in agriculture for better nutrition and health, it is critical to identify what research already exists and what is missing. Doing so will help identify how issues of marginalization and inequity are addressed in research and are shaping progress in these fields. To this end, researchers at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), supported by A4NH, undertook a scoping review of existing academic literature to pinpoint knowledge gaps that are preventing researchers, policymakers, activists and others from ensuring that, as the UN Sustainable Development Goals stress, no one is left behind.

Dr. Jody Harris of IDS, the study’s lead author, presented findings during a webinar cohosted by A4NH and IFPRI’s Gender Task Force. During that presentation, Harris first laid out definitions of equity and equality—two concepts that are frequently used interchangeably, often misunderstood, and sometimes contested. Operating from a basic premise that all people count and should be treated as equals, she said, the essential difference in the two terms centers on their focus. Equality focuses on the sameness of outcomes, while equity focuses on fair processes. Underpinning both inequality and inequity, she noted, are processes of marginalization, understood as treating a particular person or group as peripheral or insignificant.

Based on this understanding, the team conducted a literature search to determine how ANH research addresses inequity in low- and middle-income countries, including:

- which topics within food and agriculture, nutrition, and health were addressed through an equity lens; and
- which aspects of equity were addressed, including unequal outcomes, capital and resources, and structural determinants.

In the process of conducting their work, the researchers also hoped to better understand how different disciplines under the ANH umbrella study equity in order to better identify opportunities for cross-disciplinary learning and collaboration moving forward. Covering literature from 2008 to 2019, the researchers hoped to gain an understanding not only of how research is addressing equity issues but also how this has changed over time. From an initial screening that generated a potential list of over 26,000 articles, use of additional filters resulted in a final list of 243 papers that substantially explore a facet of equity in agriculture, nutrition, or health research.

As detailed in the interactive mapping of the studies included in the review, capital and resources, gender, geography, and poverty were among the most frequently studied aspects of equity. The team also drew attention to several issues that were rarely addressed among the studies reviewed, notably:

- ethnicity, disability, and age, among the different aspects shaping unequal outcomes;
- intersectionality among different aspects of equity, where these interact;
- marginalization; and
- structural aspects, such as power differentials systematically holding certain groups back.

The authors also observed that while across the board most papers identified the equity problem, a smaller but still significant number also looked at how that inequity was shaped. Fewer still went on to look at why the inequity existed in the first place.

A paper resulting from the study has been submitted for publication. Future work will include further analysis of how issues of governance and the enabling environment were addressed in the set of included studies.

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