FEED THE FUTURE
The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative

Integrating Gender and Nutrition within Agricultural Extension Services

Activity Sheet
January 2018

'The Veil of Ignorance'

Time: *Approx. 1 Hour*

Materials Needed:

- Marker/Pen/Scissors/Paper

- Use the cards included or write out slips of paper - Enough for each participant to have an equal chance of picking one of the options. *(Example: For a group of 20 there should be 10 'Male' and 10 'Female' cards).*

Photo: *'Veil of Ignorance'* game participant. © A.E. Martin 2017

Introduction

The *'Veil of Ignorance'* is a social-political thought game derived from the work of John Rawls, a 20th century American Philosopher. Rawls alleged that individuals would naturally choose to create a just and equal society if they were able to do so from an *'original position'* free of the biases of one's own sex, race, culture, innate abilities, and or position in society.[1] In short, all individuals start life from an original position of ignorance at birth, having no control over the society or culture into which they are born. Rawls uses this position as a starting point for examining social constructs, policies and their justifications. He does this from behind what he terms a 'Veil of Ignorance', or an imagined state in which all information about ourselves or the position we will come to occupy is hidden from us. This allows one to analyze societal constructs and policies, new or pre-existing, free from the biases of our own identity and interests.

For example, slavery in the U.S. was often justified as a moral imperative for spreading Christianity. As Rawls points out, if the slave owners were made to examine the issue from behind the veil, not knowing what position they would occupy, how many would cling to the same justifications given a 50/50 chance of being born a slave themselves?

Objectives

- ✓ To examine the social constructs of one's own society and culture
- ✓ To examine the challenges of discussing issues of culture
- ✓ To identify ways of changing current inequalities in one's own society

What is a *'Social Construct'*?

> … *[A]* **social construct** *is an idea or notion that appears to be natural and obvious to people who accept it but may or may not represent reality, so it remains largely an invention or artifice of a given society".*[2]

For example, 'beauty' is a social construct whose definition and socially shared ideal changes from one society to the next. The same is true of 'gender', wherein socially created roles, characteristics, and attributes are assigned to each sex.

References:
1) Rawls, John (1999). *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press. p. 118. ISBN 0-674-00078-1

2) International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (2008). "Social Construct". http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/sociology-general-terms-and-concepts/social-3 (2 Dec. 2017).

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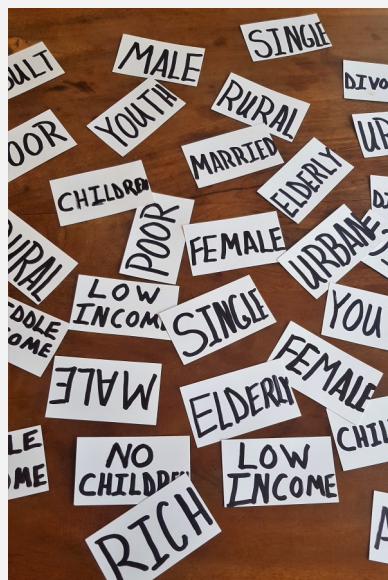Integrating Gender and Nutrition within Agricultural Extension Services

Photo: *'Veil of Ignorance'* game identity cards. © A.E. Martin 2017

Photo: *'Veil of Ignorance'* game participant. © A.E. Martin 2017

"A great many people think they are thinking, when they are merely rearranging their prejudices".

- American Philosopher, William James

Steps

1) Review title of the activity and read/summarize the introduction and objectives, along with a brief discussion on 'What is a *Social Construct?*' (*TIP:* Shuffle a set of cards and have each participant take one from the top - no choosing. Going around the room, <u>have them share their card</u>. Then <u>start a discussion using the questions below</u>. This is NOT an exhaustive list. If the group is shy at first, ask similar probing questions or call on individuals at random. Do the same for each identity card. Example: "I am a 'Male', 'Youth', 'Single', and living in an 'Urban' area". Have Fun With It!) **(5-10 Min.)**

2) Hand out the '***Gender***' cards, i.e. (Male/Female).
   - *"Is it more advantageous to be a male/female in this society?"*
   - *"What opportunities do you have as a male/female?"*
   - *"What limitations/restrictions do you have as a male/female?"*
   (5-10 Min.)

3) Hand out the '***Age***' cards, i.e. (Youth/Adult/Elderly).
   - *"What does it mean to be a male/female in your age group?"*
   - *"What control do you have over the decisions in your life?"*
   - *"Where are you on the social hierarchy based on your age/gender?"*
   (5-10 Min.)

4) Hand out the '***Marital Status***' cards, i.e. (Single/Married/Widowed/Divorced).
   - *"How does marital status affect your ability to make decisions for yourself?"*
   - *"How does your marital status affect the way society views you?"*
   - *"How does marital status impact your ability to own/inherit property?"*
   (5-10 Min.)

5) Hand out the '***Location***' cards, i.e. (Rural/Urban).
   - *"What difficulties might your location present for you?"*
   - *"How does your location affect the opportunities available to you?"*
   - *"How does society perceive you based on your location?"*
   (5-10 Min.)

6) Hand out the '***Income***' cards, i.e. (Rich/Poor/Low Income/Middle Income).
   - *"How does your life change based on this one piece of your identity?"*
   - *"How does your identity affect your ability to make decisions about money?"*
   - *"How does the rest of society perceive you based on your income level?"*
   (5-10 Min.)

7) Hand out the '***Dependents***' cards, i.e. (Children/No Children).
   - *"How is your life impacted based on whether you have children or not?"*
   - *"How do children affect the opportunities available to you?"*
   - *"How does society view you based on whether you have children or not?"*
   (5-10 Min.)

Now What?

Putting the activity into practice. Ask the participants, *"Do you think you are now better able to identify and critically analyze the social constructs in society?" "How might you confront the inequalities rooted in everyday social constructs?"* Remind participants that change starts with the individual and expands out simply by getting people to talk about it and examine their beliefs from a position of non-bias. **(5-10 Min.)**