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Weaving gender and equity into sustainability research:

The role of the partnership broker in keeping
internal and external threads moving together

We all have a gender, but few of us are gender experts. Sustainability unarguably requires greater equity, and yet our internal and external processes are steeped in gendered institutional practices. As partnership brokers, we have the opportunity to help partners to recognise and change inequitable practices. Beginning with internal team practices builds buy-in and confidence. Deep capacity building will be required to mainstream gender and equity within research for sustainable development. Join Partnership Broker Samantha Grover as she weaves gender, academia, and sustainability research into a rich tapestry in this paper.

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Weaving gender and equity into sustainability research; the role of the partnership broker in keeping internal and external threads moving together

Dr Samantha Grover, Partnership Brokers Accreditation Professional Practice Paper

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Introduction

Why do we need to consider gender and equity when working towards sustainable change?

Environmental degradation and social inequity are complex problems that transcend national boundaries. Despite decades of national and international projects, programs and aid, they continue to worsen. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals¹ are premised upon the idea that efforts to solve environmental problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss need to occur concurrently or “go hand in hand” with action to end poverty, improve health and reduce inequality (United_Nations, 2019). This framework begins to recognise the links and interconnectedness between socio-economic and biophysical systems. The “socio-ecological interface” is an emerging concept that explicitly focuses attention on this link between social and environmental problems (Rawluk et al., 2020), positing that sustainable solutions need to engage directly with and at this interface. Sustainable development, a change from current practises to improve human and planetary health that can be sustained beyond the initial intervention, will therefore be more likely to succeed if the principles of gender and equity can be woven throughout a project or program. Indeed, educating girls and women and access to family planning are 2 of the top 10 solutions to climate change, according to the extensive economic modelling efforts of Project Drawdown (Hawken, 2017). Ecological economics, with its concerted effort to place the environment back at the centre of human well-being, has recently been criticised for insufficient consideration of gender (Ruder, 2019). Gender and equity principles, then, are critical to enabling sustainable change and yet capacity to enact them across disciplines is lacking.

Diversity has been widely recognised as a driver of creative problem solving and high performing teams in the corporate sector, as described in Dwonczyk (2015). In today’s patriarchal and hierarchical global system, increasing diversity is often equated with increasing the number of women in positions of power. The diversity literature has influenced sectors well beyond the corporate, with government and academia more

¹Partnership Brokers are specifically identified as critical to Sustainable Development, with Goal 17 Partnerships

recently embracing diversity as an aspiration. While there remain pockets of confusion and resistance to actively increasing diversity in these workforces, high level support is driving change. Gender and equity are increasingly commonplace terms in government and academia, however understanding and implementation of the principles of gender and equity are as yet immature. Research for sustainable development can bring government, academic, NGO and community partners together, all with their own personal and institutional gender and equity experiences and knowledge. While this diversity of input holds the potential for innovative new solutions to problems of environmental degradation and social inequity, it also makes for a challenging working environment (Dwonczyk, 2015).

Partnership Brokers have the potential to play a critical role in weaving gender and equity principles throughout sustainable development action. Partnership Brokers are skilled professionals with expertise in supporting and strengthening partnerships through innovative and skilled management of collaborative processes (Partnership_Brokers_Association, 2019). They may be independent from the project team (external brokers) or a part of the team working towards sustainable development (internal brokers). The types of collaboration that typify the sustainable development sector are complex; multiple institutions, sectors, cultures and genders are commonplace; and a brokering lens encourages project leaders to look more closely at processes, with longer term benefits flowing on to improved outputs. There are advantages of having an internal broker focused on gender and equity within the project team: they have a long-term commitment to the partnership, ongoing relationships with partners and their integral role within the project can help to ensure that all project outputs can benefit from diversity. However, there are also disadvantages of an internal broker: they may not be a gender expert, they wear 2 hats as both researcher and broker, leading to possible prioritisation of research outputs over gender and equity inclusive processes. This paper explores the role of internal partnership brokers in weaving gender and equity principles into research working towards sustainable change, by way of reflection upon experiences of the author and her multiple collaborators.

Reflections on the journey of a soil scientist engaging with gender in academic practise

1. Begin with a focus on internal project team processes

The lofty aim of achieving sustainable development that truly addresses gender and other inequities needs to start with small, local action. Beginning with an internal focus is critical: applying gender and equity principles to the internal processes of the partnership team. Institutional and cultural norms in patriarchal society perpetuate gender inequity at multiple levels. As such, we all suffer from “unconscious bias”: social stereotypes about certain groups of people that we form outside of our conscious awareness. Unconscious bias is far more common than conscious bias and our unconscious biases are often incompatible with our conscious values (University of California, 2019). The reality of unconscious bias hit home for me when a young female diversity trainer acknowledged her unconscious bias that women with children must be married, despite the fact that this is incompatible with her conscious feminist values. Ever since then, I have been able to see my own unconscious biases: I am a lesbian yet I unconsciously assume everyone else’s “partner” is the opposite gender from them; I actively seek to engage with reconciliation and indigenous activities, and yet when I walk past a very black woman looking confused on the street, I unconsciously assume drugs or alcohol are involved. As partnership brokers, we all need to look internally, be willing to challenge our own assumptions and behaviour and keep up to date with new developments in theory, in order to build our own capacity around gender and equity.

A false separation between our domestic and professional lives prevails in Western culture. Although women have entered the paid workforce in increasing numbers since the early 20th century, our working environments have changed little from their initial model based upon the working man supported by a wife at home. Equality in the paid workforces has not delivered upon its promises, as at home women retain the lion’s share of responsibility for child raising and household work. The principles of gender and equity provide a path to move beyond equality: with the recognition that life beyond the workplace influences everyone’s work practices. As partnership brokers, we have an important role to play in structuring processes to build trust, understanding and open communication lines between everyone in the team. Partnership brokers can support teams to develop new ways of working together, which in many cases will be required first, in order to implement gender and equity principles in the team’s external facing work.

Outward facing application of gender and equity principles into partnership activities needs to build upon their integration into internal processes, in order to achieve outputs that meaningfully address gender. This recommendation is drawn from my personal and professional journey of engaging with gender. As a soil scientist, trained to take soil samples representative of the environmental problem we are trying to solve and then rigorously analyse their properties in the field and in the laboratory, I have only recently come to realise that all outward facing partnership activities intersect with gender where people are involved. I may be focused on the soil but my gender, the gender of my team and the gender of the farm workers whom I interact with when taking my soil sample all need to be considered in my work. Knowledge and capacity to act on that knowledge is what I am seeking, when I dig a hole in the ground. When my team encompasses gender and cultural diversity, and we have built our own capacity to understand how gender impacts upon knowledge, resource access and power, then we can genuinely and constructively address gender in project activities. In the past, I have intuitively recognised that, as the only woman in my team, I have special access to the female farmers that we work with, and that the knowledge of the environmental problem and potential solutions that they share with me in casual conversation over a cup of tea is different from the knowledge sharing occurring between my boss and the male farmer in the paddock. Building my capacity around gender issues now enables me to proactively weave gender into my work as a partnership broker and my technical work. Everyone has a gender, therefore gender is everyone’s concern: working from

internal processes to external outputs builds ownership of the principles of gender and equity and avoids “passing the buck” on gender. Leaving the responsibility for considering gender to gender experts risks marginalising what needs to be a central concern, if a project is to generate outputs that meaningfully address gender. This has been my experience, as described further below in the case study of ACIAR. Rwanda and Uganda’s national agricultural research organisations have come to a similar conclusion, reflecting on the lack of success of their model of a “gender focal person” (Najjingo Mangheni et al., 2019). Climate change research in Vietnam has explicitly recommended that gender needs to be considered in mainstream policy making (Phan et al., 2019)

2. Opportunities and challenges of applying this approach in academic partnerships

Academia in Australia is working to apply gender and equity principles within institutions as part of the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) Athena SWAN program. SAGE's vision is to improve gender equity in the higher education and research sector by adapting the UK's Athena SWAN Accreditation Framework to the Australian environment. Athena SWAN is recognised as successful in creating gender-inclusive workplaces and increased career satisfaction, fairer workload allocations and increased opportunities for training for women scientists. I reflect on my involvement with the Athena SWAN accreditation submission process at two different universities, in order to share how institutional processes involved in implementing gender and equity principles can impact upon staff and their capacity to weave gender and equity principles into their internal partnership brokering practise.

In 2016, La Trobe University joined the first cohort of institutions to apply for Athena SWAN accreditation and I answered a university-wide call for staff to contribute to the process. At that stage in my career I had never served on a university committee, I was part time and my contract was due to expire in a few months. As a non-tenured, junior female staff member, at home with my children for half of each week, it felt like a bold move to even apply to contribute to La Trobe's Athena SWAN accreditation submission. I applied because I could see gender inequity all around me and I wanted to do something about it. A feminist mother, an undergraduate subject in feminist politics and learning by immersion in the Student Union Women's Department were all a decade behind me, and the realities of gender inequity in academia had really hit home since having two children. I felt both excitement and trepidation upon receiving the emailed news that my submission to join the Athena SWAN Self Assessment Team had been successful. Half a dozen meetings later, I felt valued as a La Trobe staff member, as well as somewhat confused by the process and frustrated by the slow pace of our subcommittee's progress. My knowledge of gender and equity principles definitely increased by participating in the process. I could now, still somewhat awkwardly, articulate my gut feeling that women and men were not treated equally at work and I had a handful of facts and figures to back me up, in addition to my own experiences and observations. The Athena SWAN Accreditation Framework sets ambitious targets, far distant from the current realities of academia in Australia. My standards rose, with regards to what gender equity should look like, and yet I still swung between inspired optimism for positive change and scepticism as to how these ambitious proclamations could actually be achieved within the current system. Just as La Trobe University submitted their Athena SWAN application and begun on their Action Plan to improve gender equity, I left for RMIT University.

RMIT was part of the second cohort of universities to apply for Athena SWAN accreditation, so when I joined in 2018 the process was just beginning. My knowledge of the principles and possibilities of gender equity was advanced in comparison with my colleagues, given my previous experience at La Trobe, and I was keen to contribute. I signed up for workshops, emailed my interest to the website-listed contact and read what I could find about Athena SWAN at RMIT. However, the process was quite different, with no staff-led working groups and a small number of workshops run by facilitators. The active engagement between senior staff and junior staff as part of the Self Assessment Team working groups at La Trobe was missing in the process at RMIT. Reports were written, full of well-intentioned ideas but lacking in input from and connectivity with staff. None the less, I spent my weekends poring over the draft Athena SWAN action plan and emailed detailed comments to a project officer. Gender and equity is important to me, so while not being able to make a significant contribution to the Athena SWAN accreditation process at RMIT was disappointing, simply reading the documents has inspired me to be braver in trying to implement principles of gender and equity into my academic practice.

Case study of an internal broker weaving gender and equity principles into “Kicking goals for Climate” research partnership

“Kicking goals for Climate” is a small project, with team members and funding contained within RMIT. We aim to trial a collaborative staff-student partnership model, with the objective of inspiring change in social practices by communicating the linkages between climate change, sport and food via an IT communication platform. I have used this project as testing ground for developing both my partnership brokering practice and, as part of that, my ability to implement principles of gender and equity. Diversity in the team members was reasonably simple to arrange: I approached one male and one female Professor to collaborate with me on this. One said yes straight away, and the other person passed me on to a colleague whom she suggested was more appropriate for this work. I was also able to invite one male and one female student to be involved in the project, who had shown interest in this topic in my classes. Gender diversity in teams is quite easy to achieve, albeit still not the norm, within academia.

However, there is a lot more to truly implementing principles of gender and equity than simply having both men and women in a team. Hierarchies and our lives outside of work require careful consideration. As a junior academic attempting to work collaboratively with a Professor/Head of School and an Associate Professor/Head of Research Centre and students, I was very conscious of hierarchy, authority and power. I tried two approaches to “level the playing field” and enable us all to work together as equals. In the first meeting of the three academics, I opened a conversation around motivations for involvement. I outlined why I had applied for this funding and my aims of increasing my internal visibility, building networks and progressing my basic research on climate change and sport within RMIT. My collaborators then outlined their, quite different but compatible, motivations for involvement. Prior to this conversation, I was operating from a position of inferiority, feeling very grateful that these two senior and important people would support me by taking part in this project. This critical conversation enabled each person to lay their motivations on the table, dropping the façades of position and importance and also enabling me to take each person’s desired outcomes in to consideration as the project progressed. The Partnership Brokering Good Practice Principles 2 and 3 informed this critical conversation, as considerable self-reflection, followed by openness and courageous practice was required for me to initiate this conversation and disprove my assumptions about the internal power dynamics of our project team. In our next meeting with the students, I took a more structured approach and tried out a new tool: Lego Serious Play. A professionally facilitated Lego Serious Play session enabled staff and students to interact as equals, forcing everyone to contribute their ideas, take turns and listen to each other. This was very successful in breaking down the staff/student divide, the traditional “we hold the knowledge and we teach it to you” model of universities, and starting our project off with everyone contributing as equals.

As a partnership broker and mother of two young children, I have been very conscious of our responsibilities beyond the workplace as I have attempted to weave gender and equity principles into “Kicking goals for climate”. All three academics involved in the project have primary school aged children, and two work part time. The Lego Serious Play workshop was scheduled for the mid semester break, so students could come, but also coincided with the school holidays. I extended an invitation to the other two academics to have their children either join us at the Lego Serious Play workshop, or go on an excursion with my mother and my two children to the Art Gallery nearby. Attempting to weave the principles of gender and equity into the internal processes of the Scoping and Building Phase of this project team within an academic environment has required careful consideration, courageous conversations and proactive approaches outside of usual work practices. As the project moves into the Managing and Maintaining Phase, these new ways of working will become normal and we anticipate that project outcomes and external stakeholders will demonstrate application of gender and equity principles.

3. Opportunities and challenges of applying this approach in research for development partnerships

My own journey into applying gender and equity principles into my research was inspired by the funding body that has commissioned my ongoing research on tropical peatland restoration in Indonesia. The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) launched their “Gender Equity Policy and Strategy 2017-2022” in December 2017. While driven from above, by Australian Government targets that 80% of all aid investments effectively address gender issues, ACIAR has whole-heartedly embraced the challenge of “walking the talk” internally and is committed to tackling the “deeply entrenched bias around women in science and women in agriculture” (ACIAR, 2017). Mixed emotions tumbled over each other as I first heard about the seriousness of ACIAR’s commitment to gender equity. One of 4 women in a room of around 30 soil scientists at a biennial meeting of Project Leaders from ACIAR’s Soil and Land Management research portfolio in November 2017, I heard our (balding white male) portfolio leader announce that ACIAR is aiming for 50% female Project Leaders by 2020. I felt inspired, lucky, sceptical and somewhat disbelieving all at once. At that time, ACIAR had 1 female Program leader out of 9. Eighteen months later, half of the Program leaders are women. Internal practices within ACIAR reflect a very different culture than persists in the organisations from which they draw their Project Leaders. One example that brought this difference home to me very strongly was a morning tea for a staff member who was taking maternity leave. The whole organisation dropped their work to come to this event, and the CEO spoke with sincerity and empathy about her temporary absence from the office, wishing her well in the challenges of parenting and anticipating her return. Within academia I have never witnessed or heard of such an event, and in my experiences and that of my ECR peers, central policy encouraging women back to work is ignored at a departmental level.

So, ACIAR may be meeting the challenge of implementing gender equity principles internally, but how does this affect the Research for Development partnerships that they fund?

Case study of an internal broker weaving gender and equity principles into a research for development partnership

Phase 1 Scoping and Building: Confusion/Frustration

Within our project, the integration of considerations of gender throughout the project got off to a rocky start. ACIAR contracted a “gender expert” to “help” us: I was optimistic about this. However, the experience was disempowering, frustrating and confusing. Our draft project proposal was sent to the gender expert, who inserted “male and female” throughout the document, where-ever project activities mentioned community. Without any capacity building of the project team (led by a biophysical agricultural scientist), we were now required to sign off on this integration of gender throughout our project. A gender specialist was hastily recruited to the team, albeit for a very small fraction of her time. A quiet woman, she attended the initial project meeting and then became ill and unavailable. I felt disappointed in the process and uneasy about not being able to deliver.

Phase 2 Managing and Maintaining: Engagement/Capacity Building

A year later at our Project Review meeting, ACIAR and the Project team identified that we needed to do further work to prioritise gender. With our first gender expert officially off the team, who was to take responsibility for this? Our Indonesian Project Leader identified that she had some experience working on gender and I offered to contribute to progressing our work in this space. Some in the team expressed concern about my lack of gender expertise and thus responsibility was left open. The very next day, our proactive Program Manager encouraged the team to contribute to the upcoming conference “Seeds of Change: Gender in Agricultural Research for Development”. This aligned well with our Indonesian Project

Leader's expressed desire to visit Australia. Looking through my partnership brokers lens, I could see a great opportunity to build capacity around gender and equity within the team, with co-benefits of enhanced cross cultural learning, relationship building, team cohesion and interdisciplinary knowledge sharing. This inspired me to support and encourage her and two of her more junior colleagues to prepare abstracts for the conference. I collated their abstracts and submitted a proposal to present a whole panel of our work from Indonesia. I also helped them to draft and submit an application for funding to support their travel and accommodation to participate in the conference. Both the panel proposal and travel support were successful. Our Project Leader came to Canberra for a day after the conference and arranged a Gender Workshop for the project team, led by a gender expert. The learning both during the conference and the Workshop was enormous. We have built our knowledge around gender and equity principles considerably by dedicating this week of focussed attention and stepping out of our disciplinary comfort zones to not only attend but present at a gender-focused conference. One of my main insights from the Workshop was the huge range of existing understandings of gender and equity principles within the team, as well as the possible conflicts between prioritising gender and other values, such as sustainability. I sat beside Project Leader and witnessed his light bulb moment as the classic cartoon of 3 boys standing on boxes brought home to him the difference between equality and equity. I struggled to articulate my confusion as to how soil sampling intersects with gender and then accepted help from the team to understand this and match it with my previous experience (described above). At lunch, the toxic historical gender relations at our host institution bubbled to the surface as our host struggled to contain her rage about responsibility for the kitchen, intersecting with my environmental and cultural concerns around minimising waste and ensuring our Indonesian colleagues had the opportunity to eat rice (after a conference full of sandwiches!). As our project team moves solidly into the "Managing and Maintaining" Phase, we have begun to build our internal capacity around gender and equity principles. At our subsequent 2019 Annual Meeting, half a day was set aside within the program for a whole of project "Inclusivity" workshop. There is still much to be done, but I feel that we are beginning to weave gender and equity principles into the everyday workings of our project. This is not a story with an end but more like a first chapter. These reflections provide an example of how a partnership broker without formal gender expertise can nonetheless bring gender into focus. To achieve sustainable change, research for development assuredly needs to actively engage with principles of gender and equity. There are simply not enough gender experts to go around. While their expertise is certainly required, everyone can build their own and their teams' capacity to contribute.

Conclusion: Key learnings and areas for further exploration

The key insight that I would like to share from this exploration of the role of partnership brokers in weaving principles of gender and equity through research for development is that *this is critical work*. An internal application of the principles of gender and equity to the processes by which a team works together can support everyone in the team to bring their best contribution to the project. Partnership brokers have long recognised that *how* we work together is critical to a project's success. Applying a gender and equity lens to our internal processes can break down hierarchies and create bonds of trust and mutual understanding. More than an increase in the project budget or the hours spent working on project objectives or even, dare I say it, the number of soil samples analysed, improving a team's shared understanding of gender and equity principles can lead to improved project outcomes and more sustainable change. There will be discomfort, disinterest, possibly heated disagreements as personal and professional worlds collide. Disrupting entrenched ways of working together is not easy but it is possible, and the rewards are worth the effort. Sustainable change requires more of all of us and partnership brokers can further develop our capacity to guide the implementation of gender and equity principles throughout all of our work.

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