

**Gender: Hinder or helper? Unpacking gender identity's impacts on long-term fellowships
in West Africa**

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Introduction

AgriCorps, an American Fellowship program, was designed to connect agricultural professionals to school-based agricultural education in developing countries (AgriCorps, 2021). The AgriCorps program provided an opportunity for youth to learn from fellows who serve as an agricultural educator, 4-H/FFA advisor, and an agriculture extension agent. (AgriCorps, 2021). Fellows were U.S. citizens placed in Ghana and Liberia where many cultural norms between North American and West Africa differ, including gender roles and gender-based interaction (Ukhun, 2003). Due to these differences affecting the fellow experience, the aim of this study was to analyze the impact of gender on the fellows' experiences in their long-term fellowship.

Theoretical Framework

Exploring the impact of gender on a long-term fellowship experience used a lense of Feminist Theory. Feminist Theory is the notion that interactions between women and men exist through a power hierarchy lens, in which inequalities due to gender are highlighted (Keedle et al., 2019; Lindsley et al., 2019). The central concept of Feminist Theory is gender, unlike sex, is a non-biological social construct (Parpart et al., 2000). Sexism spans many spaces—economic, anthropological, politics (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2012) and integrates itself into many cultures, remaining a present force in Africa (Ukhun, 2003). The goal of Feminist research is to understand and remove inequalities in gender that scaffold the structure of societies (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2012).

Methods

This study was part of a larger research project assessing many qualities of, and experiences within, long-term, international fellowships. This phenomenological study consisted of semi-structured virtual interviews. The population for this study was past AgriCorps fellows, and the sample consisted of 18 individuals, 5 male, 13 female, and 21 to 29 years old at the beginning of their fellowship year. Participants were interviewed via an online meeting platform, for 30-90 minutes, responding to semi-structured questions (Given, 2008). The data was then analyzed using Glaser and Strass' (1967) constant comparative method. Lincoln and Guba (1985) guided the trustworthiness procedures implemented throughout this study.

Results

Through our analysis of the interview data, four emerging themes became evident. The themes are described as: female gender disparity, male gender advancement, perceived gender roles, and female solidarity.

Within the theme "Female Gender Disparity," The participants who identified as female described negative prejudice effects, and a change in treatment because of their female gender identity. Participant 5 said she noticed men placed less value on her ideas due to her gender,

stating, “there were some differences being a female and identifying as such, that, I think there was a little bit of hesitation, especially from men to kind of take what I was saying and put some value to it.”

The “Male Gender Advancement” theme indicated participants with a male gender identity faced positive gender-based biases. Participant 16 described he was “probably blessed” because he was “in [an] easier position than [his] female colleagues.”

In the theme “Perceived Gender Roles,” female participants spoke about specific expectations placed on them because they were women. Additionally, female participants felt frustrated with the perceived gender roles in their communities. Participant 17 mentioned there were “certain things that people expected me to do or expected of me because I am female.”

Lastly, the theme “Female Solidarity” developed because several participants reflected on their gender, helping integrate them into local society, and specifically with fellow local women. Female participants mentioned they felt their gender provided connections with local women.

Conclusions

Through these emerging themes from the participants within this study, we know fellows involved in AgriCorps witness or received gender identity-based changes in behavior from locals in their West African host-countries. This supports what we know from both sexism in this region (Ukhun, 2003), and feminist theory (Parpart et al., 2000) effecting how gender-based social constructs affect individual’s behavior towards one another, based on sex. We can also conclude this affected their fellowship experience, in both negative and positive ways. Fellows received or witnessed negative treatment towards themselves, if female, or towards other female fellows. Male fellows did not see the same gender-based issues as their female counterparts but did recognize the difference in the treatment. Female fellows also found gender-based strengths through solidarity with other local women that brought connection and community.

Recommendations

Fellowships such as AgriCorps provide a unique opportunity for fellows to gain international experience in development. Part of that experience is assimilating to, and being affected by, local culture. To make improvements based on our findings for future like-programs, we recommend implementing and/or increasing gender-training for all fellows. We know gender issues are prevalent in African society (Ukhun, 2003). Training should aim to prepare both male and female fellows, volunteers, and like participants for the gender-based difference in treatment among them.

Additionally, we recommend further research be conducted on programs in other regions and countries to better understand possible differences and similarities between them. Lastly, we recommend research be conducted with in-country stakeholders to better understand ways to prevent, mitigate, and/or handle these issues from the perspective of a native of the regions being entered by these fellows.

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