

event called for Raj to speak and then hear responses from four eminent figures. Dr. Norman Borlaug was the first to respond. He had received the Nobel Peace Prize for launching the Green Revolution that created a surge of farm productivity and saved millions of people from starvation. The next speaker was Sir Gordon Conway, scientific advisor at the Department for International Development, the British aid agency. Then Dr. Xiaoyang Chen spoke, who was president of South China Agricultural University.

By the time Dr. Chen finished speaking, the event had run long past its allotted time, and there was one person still to respond, a woman, Catherine Bertini, who had been executive director of the UN's World Food Programme. She sensed the audience was tired of all the talking, so she came straight to the point.

"Dr. Shah, I would like to remind you of the quote from one of our founding mothers of the United States of America, Abigail Adams, who wrote to her husband while he was in Philadelphia working on the Declaration of Independence, and said, 'Don't forget the ladies.' If you and your colleagues at the foundation don't pay attention to the gender differences in agriculture, you will do what many others have done in the past, which is waste your money. The only difference will be you'll waste a lot more money a lot faster."

Catherine sat down, and the meeting adjourned.

A few months later, Raj hired Catherine at the Gates Foundation to teach us about the links between agriculture and gender.

"They're Almost All Women"

When Catherine came on board, there was no talk at all of gender at the foundation. It wasn't anywhere in our strategy. I don't know what others were thinking at the time, but I'm

embarrassed to say that I had not thought of gender in connection with our development work. I'm not saying that I missed the fact that women were the principal beneficiaries of many of our programs. Family planning was clearly a women's issue, as was maternal and newborn health. To reach more children with vaccinations, we had to target mothers with our message. The gender element in those issues was easy to see. But farming was different. There was no obvious gender aspect to it, at least not to me, and not at the start.

That began to change about the time Catherine joined Raj in a meeting with Bill and me to review our agricultural strategy. Raj introduced Catherine and said, "She's here working on gender." That word seemed to provoke Bill, and he started talking about being effective, getting results, and staying focused on that. Bill supported women's empowerment and gender equity but thought they would distract us from the goal of growing more food and feeding more people—and he thought anything that would blur our focus would hurt our effectiveness.

Bill can be intimidating, but Catherine was eager to have that conversation. "This is completely about effectiveness," she said. "We want to make smallholder farmers as effective as they can be, and we want to give them all the tools—the seeds, fertilizer, loans, labor—they need to achieve it, so it's very important for us to know who the farmers are and what they want. Next time you're in Africa driving in a rural area, look out the window and see who's working in the fields. They're almost all women. If you listen only to the men, because they're the ones with the time and social permission to go to the meetings, then you're not going to know what the women really need, and they're the ones who are doing most of the work."

Catherine left the meeting and said to Raj, "Why am I here? If he doesn't buy it, it's never going to work." Raj just said, "He heard you. Trust me."

A few months later, Catherine was driving down the road listening on her car radio to an

interview Bill was doing on NPR about economic development, and Bill said, “The majority of poor people in the world are farmers. Most people don’t know that the women are doing most of that work, and so we’re giving them new seeds, new techniques. And when you give women those tools, they use them very effectively.”

Catherine almost drove off the road.

What Catherine experienced there, which Raj predicted, is that Bill learns. He loves to learn. Yes, he challenges people very hard, sometimes too hard, but he listens and learns, and when he learns, he is willing to shift. This passion for learning is not just Bill’s approach; it’s mine as well. It’s the central pillar of the culture we’ve tried to create at the foundation, and it explains how we all—some faster than others—came to agree that gender equity should drive the work we’re all trying to do.

The fact that most of the farmers in Malawi are women wouldn’t matter if gender differences and inequalities didn’t matter. But as Patricia’s life shows, gender differences and inequalities *do* matter—in ways that make it much harder for women to grow the crops they need.

Hans Rosling once told me a story that helps makes the point. He was working with several women in a village in the Congo to test the nutritional value of cassava roots. They were harvesting the roots, marking them with a number, and putting them into baskets to take them down to the pond to soak. They filled three baskets. One woman carried off the first basket, another woman carried the second basket, and Hans carried the third. They walked single file down the path, and a minute later, as they all put down their baskets, one of the women turned around, saw Hans’s basket, and shrieked as if she’d seen a ghost. “How did this get here?!”

“I carried it,” Hans said.

“You *can’t* carry it!” she shouted. “You’re a man!”