

# Gender and Diversity: Moving Ahead at

# I R R I

October, 2004

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The Strategic Advisory Service for Human Resources (SAS-HR) works to strengthen the human resources network of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). It devises strategies that recognize the diversity and autonomy of each participating CGIAR research center, define short- and long-term needs with staff and management, create solutions, and help establish a virtual community of human resources professionals in CGIAR centers, donor agencies, and partner institutions.

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## Introduction to the Good Practice Showcase

” If only we knew what we already know” is a dilemma that haunts knowledge-based organizations. The CGIAR is no exception.

Every organization does certain things exceptionally well. But most organizations do not actively capture those experiences or make them available to others. As a result, valuable knowledge is lost.

The CGIAR system is actively renewing itself. In the complex network of autonomous centers that characterizes the system, sharing good practices will help to save money, speed progress, avoid costly errors, foster teamwork, and enhance the quality of our products and services. All of this will strengthen our brand in the world and reinforce the faith of stakeholders in the ability of the system to evolve and meet future needs.

The Strategic Advisory Service for Human Resources—a service established by CIAT, CIMMYT, IPGRI, IWMI, WorldFish, and the CGIAR System Office—is pleased to present this series showcasing good Human Resource Management practices. The practices described come from staff members who chose ingenious options—often counter-intuitive to the thinking at the time—and managers who implemented them with imagination and effectiveness. By expanding the realm of the possible in the discipline, they also add to our body of professional knowledge.

For more information about the practice described in this publication, please contact the CGIAR Center that implemented the practice. For more information on other titles in this series, please contact the SAS-HR at email:[sashr@cgiar.org](mailto:sashr@cgiar.org)

## What Motivated the New Practice?

At the International Rice Research Institute, there has never been any shortage of major challenges. But perhaps the most difficult seems to be getting the right gender and diversity balance. All progressive organizations are struggling with this issue and few can say with confidence that they have achieved unqualified success. IRRI is no exception.

A major international conference hosted by the CGIAR Gender and Diversity Program in September 2000 sparked a renewal of interest in G&D at IRRI. The Institute's representative returned from this conference in Nairobi with a new appreciation for gender and diversity, and a new understanding of the *added strength that an organization can acquire through a diverse workforce*.

For many participants, the Nairobi meeting was a personal watershed. They recognized two things:

- people of different ages, gender, academic and national backgrounds view the world from dissimilar vantage points
- in a scientific research environment it is more effective to address a problem from several angles, rather than from a single perspective.

IRRI Management was convinced that it was time to take a fresh look at G&D and a task force was set up in December 2000 to conduct a complete review of G&D at the Institute. Demonstrating IRRI's renewed commitment to diversity, the seven members were as diverse as could be: men and women, researchers and non-scientists, a spouse, and seven different nationalities. The Chair, from Nepal, had also lived for many years in Australia and the Philippines.

The Task Force spent six months examining various aspects of the issues, including trends over the past 10 years. Many employees, past and present, were interviewed. IRRI's practices were compared with those of other CGIAR centers. By the time the Task Force submitted its report in June 2001, it was clear that IRRI was still some distance from achieving an effective balance in gender and diversity.

Among the Nationally Recruited Staff (NRS) there was better balance. So the Task Force decided to concentrate all its efforts on Internationally Recruited Staff (IRS)

The percentage of IRS women had remained constant between 10 and 15% for many years. The Task Force compared IRRI's record of recruiting and retaining female

IRS with other CGIAR centers. IRRI was lagging behind and many other centers had done better, proving that improvements were also possible at IRRI.

In the diversity of nationalities, IRRI's performance was quite good. But the Task Force discovered that although IRRI's staff came from different countries, some countries were more represented than others and a few major countries important to IRRI's mission were not represented at all.

The Task Force presented a set of sweeping recommendations to improve the situation and the Institute responded strongly by approving most of the Task Force recommendations and taking prompt action.

### **What Was Done?**

In the three years that have followed, IRRI carefully focused on a set of targeted initiatives to address the Task Force recommendations. Much has been achieved.

From the outset, IRRI recognized that achieving significant progress in diversity would take considerable time and that it is unlikely that any organization would ever be able to claim complete success in this area.

The Task Force recommendations were wide-ranging, covering policy and procedures, recruitment practices, spouse employment, work environment, and living conditions. There was clear recognition that rather than disjointed individual initiatives, an integrated set of changes was critical to success.

So what were some of these changes?

IRRI made advances in seven key areas:

#### *1. Investment in a New Position*

The first step was to create a new position - a Gender, Diversity, and Orientation (GDO) Assistant, as part of the HR group. This was essential to give focused attention to this initiative.

This position was given responsibility for:

- many practical arrangements associated with each position search, including the logistics of all interviews
- looking after the welfare of the family: advising about shopping, schools, hiring of domestic staff, and other concerns familiar to those who have arrived in a new country for the first time.
- social responsibilities, such as organizing meetings of spouse groups

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- helping the Director General's wife host meetings of new staff and their families
- arranging quarterly "Hail and Farewell" parties.

International staff and families quickly came to appreciate having an ally within the IRRI administration. The value added by the GDO Assistant was clearly recognized.

Then came the massive retrenchment of 2002 when about 20% of NRS positions were eliminated. Recognizing its importance, the GDO Assistant position was retained under the new title of HR Coordinator

### 2. Policy Changes

Many changes had to start from Policies. The policy manuals were re-written in a gender-neutral style and some inconsistencies that had created confusion were clarified.

Statements approved by the Board affirming IRRI's commitment to "*the principal of gender and diversity equality*" were included in both IRS and NRS policies. IRRI reaffirmed its commitment "*to increase the percentage of women employees, while attempting to broaden the diversity of staff by age, place of origin, educational background, and so forth...*"

To enhance monitoring and evaluation of impact, IRRI started submitting a special G&D annual report to the Board on its plans and achievements

### 3. Recruitment Procedures

To some extent IRRI search committees have always enjoyed a fair amount of independence. The Task Force questioned this *laissez-faire* policy and recommended that each search committee should be provided with more orientation and guidance on diversity issues.

HR began managing more of the administrative functions of search committees, providing committee members more time to concentrate on the main task: selecting the best person for the job.

How was the recruitment process strengthened?

- The Director for Administration and Human Resources now sends guidelines to the search committee chair reminding him/her of all relevant policies.
- All position announcements are to contain a standard statement on equal opportunity, gender, and diversity.
- Search committee members are advised to avoid all forms of discriminatory questioning, to use women's networks in order to "spread a wide net", and to discuss openly spouse employment prospects.

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- Search committees are urged to take a pro-active stance instead of the traditional “advertise-and-wait-for-applications” approach.
- When a search committee recommends the hiring of a male candidate, the chair is asked to write to the DG explaining what steps were taken to find qualified female candidates
- The composition of search committees is a critical factor for success. HR reviewed the composition of all search committees from 1998 onwards, and found that about half of them had no women and that women chairs were rare. Worse, the majority of members were from developed countries although more than 90% of IRRI staff members are from developing countries. Most chairs were from English-speaking countries or from countries where English is well known such as India and the Netherlands.

IRRI decided that all future search committees would have at least one woman member and that diversity balance should be ensured when search committees were formed.

Positive results have followed. One search committee, if not for the presence of a lone male member, would have had 100% women!

### *4. Spouse Employment*

#### Unit Appointments & Consultancies

- Recognizing the increasing importance of spouse employment for organizations and “dual career” couples, IRRI refined the rules on “Unit” appointments.
- These are appointments made when a fully qualified IRS spouse is appointed to a part-time IRS position that has been specially created for him/her. In every appointment, it is assured that the spouse appointed is fully qualified for the job.
- In addition to Unit appointments, the policy on consultants was re-defined.
- A number of spouses have worked at IRRI in Unit appointments or as consultants...

#### Partnerships with other Organizations

- IRRI has developed friendly relations with other organizations in the Manila area to generally strengthen HR and to build new opportunities for spouse employment.
- In the past several years, IRRI spouses have worked at international schools, UN agencies, and the Asian Development Bank, further strengthening ties between the Institute and other employers in the region.



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- To provide another avenue for spouse employment, earlier this year, IRRRI joined PartnerJob, an international service that specializes in helping expatriate spouses find employment.

### Reaching out to spouses early

- Job candidates who come to IRRRI for an interview now have the option to bring their spouse.
- For spouses who opt not to accompany the IRS job candidate to the interview, HR created a short video that clearly depicts life at IRRRI and in the Philippines.

### 6. Support for Children's Education

One of the main concerns of expatriate staff is education for their children and IRRRI has made some fundamental changes in this area:

- To start with, it was necessary to create more family-friendly policies on schooling support. IRRRI used to apply a two-child rule, under which the parents were entirely responsible for school fees for the third and any subsequent children. This policy was changed and now IRRRI reimburses 75% of eligible school fees for all children, up until university entrance.
- IRRRI also offers an annual Educational Travel Grant (ETF) to dependents, which allows them to return to the Philippines to visit their parents at IRRRI once a year.
- These students are also accorded an annual “reverse” home leave. Thus, IRRRI dependents at universities in Australia, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere can return to IRRRI twice a year (ETF + home leave). Parents and dependents alike value these travel benefits highly.
- In some cases, children had to wake up at 4:30 am to get to school in Manila on time, after a bus ride of two hours or more! This exhausting process was very demanding for the young and several families left IRRRI for this very reason.
- The “early-rising” problem has now been resolved with the establishment of a small branch of the International School of Manila (ISM) on the IRRRI campus.
- This tiny school - the International School of Los Baños, (ISLB) - can accommodate 35 young children up to the age of 12. Alarm clocks no longer ring at 4:30 a.m. as the school is only a 10-minute drive from where most IRRRI staff live.
- The school is also a steady employer of IRRRI spouses and helps to attract new staff to the Institute. When prospective IRRRI job candidates see the school and meet the teachers, all their apprehensions about schooling vanish!

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- For very young children, IRS have established the Rainbow School, which now shares a building with ISLB. IRRI provides free space for this school.
- Together, the two schools contribute immeasurably to the overall quality of life at IRRI.

### *7. Improvements in Housing*

IRRI Staff Housing (ISH), an attractive complex of about 60 residential units, is home to most international staff.

- All houses have been provided with a free high-speed internet link, thus satisfying a strong desire of IRS families to be “connected”.
- A new telephone system was also installed to ensure that IRRI staff and residents enjoy top quality telephone service.
- IRRI’s IT Services began renting fully-loaded and serviced PCs to families and setting up e-mail accounts for family members. One French family was delighted to learn that they could listen to radio broadcasts from back home, over the Internet!
- Tennis courts, a swimming pool, and a children’s playground are available for use by residents who also enjoy many social opportunities.
- Some staff live outside IRRI Staff Housing, mostly post-docs and other short-term international staff. They sometimes feel isolated from the main international group and had less reason than IRS to enjoy their housing. IRRI maintains 24 apartment units for these employees, within two kilometers of IRRI Staff Housing.
- These staff members are invited to ISH social functions and ISH sports facilities have been made available to all international staff, not just to those who actually reside at ISH.
- In addition, the rent paid by short-term international staff was lowered by a third
- Some problems are less easy to resolve. Post-docs, generally young and active, sometimes find life in Los Baños less than exhilarating. Some young post-docs, especially those whose English is still developing, find building a social life challenging. So IRRI provides occasional bus service to Manila and does its best to provide entertainment: sports, clubs, and associations.

### **What has been achieved?**

Building successful gender and diversity practices takes a long time. Recognizing this, the approach at IRRI has been to work patiently and steadily towards a clearly defined set of objectives based on the recommendations of the Task Force.

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- There is now a heightened awareness among all staff regarding the true importance of gender and diversity.
- These issues and actions now feature regularly on Board and Management Committee agendas. With this added visibility significant results have followed.
- Staff policies have improved and IRRI's stance on these issues is clear, sending a strong signal to all about how IRRI values staff diversity
- Creation of a dedicated position within HR to deal with these matters and the welfare of expatriate staff and their families has helped bring a new dynamism to the initiatives.
- The quality of the recruiting process has significantly improved during this period. Search committee membership has been broadened to include more women, developing-country nationals, and those who are not yet 100% fluent in English. Clear instructions are being given to search committees about what is expected of them, as well as advice on how to identify top-quality candidates who can help enhance diversity at IRRI. Most staff now appreciate that search committees eager to improve diversity have to aggressively seek out women and developing country candidates, rather than simply hoping that many will apply. Unfortunately, experience has indicated that they don't.!
- Some progress has been made in spouse employment.
- Perhaps the most notable change in recent years has been the improvement in the quality of life enjoyed by international staff in better schooling facilities, communications, housing, and security.
- Amongst NRS, about 40% of all staff are women, including many in the most senior positions. This is a high percentage considering that men still dominate fieldwork and certain other traditional male bastions such as vehicle maintenance.
- Some male fiefdoms have crumbled. There was not a single female security guard at IRRI three years ago. Now about 20% of all guards are women and they bring skills and talents that have had a very positive impact. "Lady guards" as they are called by all seem to be able to effortlessly deal with tense situations. Some have degrees in criminology
- Women at IRRI account for 32% of all scientists, as compared to 20% in the CGIAR. Overall, women form 36% of IRRI's workforce, somewhat better than the CGIAR average of 27%. IRRI's proportion of staff from developing countries in the Scientist staff group (77%) is considerably higher than the CGIAR average (58%).

### **What has been learned?**

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This process has provided some very interesting lessons for management and staff

- Education of children is a “non-negotiable” item. If good schooling and organizational support are not available, or if the good schools are located too far away, it will be very difficult to recruit and retain IRS with school-age children
- Care needs to be extended in other areas, from housing to social activities, to make staff and their families feel welcome and at home.
- The importance of spouse employment is growing. Male spouses have been especially difficult to satisfy. If a male spouse is unemployed and unhappy, it is highly likely that he will leave and take his IRS wife with him. This needs to be considered very carefully, from the very first interview
- Spouse employment is a two-way street. Finding a good job requires serious commitment and effort on the part of a spouse and acceptance of certain unfavorable conditions, such as commuting time between Los Baños and Manila. Not all are ready to make these sacrifices
- The demand for good communications from home is very important. Sometimes, it has been startling to observe how passionate some spouses are for good communications. Special efforts are required to keep everyone “connected”.
- Living in a foreign country can be a difficult experience for some. Special attention needs to be devoted to food services, social and recreation facilities
- The position of the dedicated HR Coordinator has seen frequent turnovers. Recruiting replacements has not been easy as applicants have been few in number. This job requires very special commitment and attitudes in addition to skills. It seems dealing with such important and difficult issues can be an intimidating responsibility!
- Finally the biggest risk is that staff who do not enjoy their time at IRRI and who decide to leave could negatively influence IRRI’s ability to recruit the best people. The world has become very small and word gets around very quickly.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

Although the gender and diversity scene at IRRI has improved, much remains to be done:

- Women are greatly under-represented on IRRI’s Management Committee and Board of Trustees

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- Women IRS are still few in number
- IRRI has no IRS from Indonesia, a neighbor of the Philippines and a major rice country. The same is true of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and a few other “rice” countries in the region. This needs to be addressed.
- Although IRRI policies do not ignore these issues, there is a need to have full-blown Anti-Harassment and Discrimination Policies and a Recruitment and Appointment Statement
- To assist in long-term diversity planning, a staff survey may be required
- Certain policies, such as on paternity and adoption leave, are still incomplete or lacking
- Improvements in sports facilities are required to ensure that all staff have the same opportunities for recreation.
- A mentoring program has just been launched. Careful attention will be needed to ensure it flourishes.
- Closer ties are needed with other nearby employers. One forthcoming event sure to be of interest to spouses will be a workshop conducted by the Spouse Employment Coordinator of the Asian Development Bank.
- Other organizations conduct short programs of possible interest to IRRI spouses, *e.g.*, retirement planning seminars and workshops on safety and security for women travelers. The Institute needs to include spouses in these events, on a reciprocal basis.
- IRRI has to recognize that it is unlikely that all IRS spouses want to work or that those who do will be able to find a good job. The Institute should make efforts to include spouses in regular in-house learning experiences in IT, photography, first-aid, defensive driving, and so forth.

IRRI’s management is committed to this long-term effort to make the Institute a friendly and productive place where all staff can feel at home.

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