**New Paper - The Genesis and Performance of Gender Focal Person Structures in Rwanda and Uganda National Agricultural Organisations: A Critique**

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**Academic Editor:** Manfred Max Bergman

Details at: https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290

## Abstract

Gender Focal Persons (GFPs) are commonly recruited by organisations as part of institutional efforts to mainstream gender. Despite their wide usage, these structures often struggle to achieve the intended goals. The underlying factors that explain their limited success are not well understood; yet, this would inform strategies for institutionalising gender in research institutions. This paper traces the genesis and operationalisation of the gender focal person structures in Rwanda and Uganda national agricultural research organisations, to unearth factors influencing their performance. Results presented are based on document reviews and qualitative interviews with scientists, managers, and GFPs in the two organisations. We found that the GFPs hinged on individuals and donors, and operated in an ad hoc manner without streamlined procedures. The structures were not embedded in institutional frameworks, hence their low visibility within the organisations. They were characterized by informality, voluntarism, unclear terms of reference, and accountability frameworks. We conclude that the ineffective performance of the GFPs in both organisations is explained by the informal approach used to establish, operationalise, and nurture them. Institutionalising the structure would require that the pioneering champions and donors successfully negotiate the embedding of GFPs into the mainstream; eventually, guaranteeing allocation of adequate human and financial resources from national budgets, as well as the establishment of accountability systems.

Keywords: [**gender mainstreaming**](https://www.mdpi.com/search?q=gender%20mainstreaming); [**gender units**](https://www.mdpi.com/search?q=gender%20units); **[institutionalisation of gender](https://www.mdpi.com/search?q=institutionalisation%20of%20gender)**; [**agricultural research**](https://www.mdpi.com/search?q=agricultural%20research)

## 1. Introduction

The need for gender-responsive agricultural development is widely recognized, and expressed for decades in global, regional, and national development strategies and programmes. The Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 as a framework to guide global development, and their precursor, the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) [[**1**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B1-sustainability-13-10290)], all recognize gender equality as a development target. Within Africa, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) policy framework advocates for agricultural transformation, wealth creation, food security and nutrition, economic growth, and prosperity for all [[**2**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B2-sustainability-13-10290)]. Globally, the Gender Focal Person (GFP) strategy has been commonly adopted by agricultural organisations as part of an institutional effort to mainstream gender in their programmes. The GFPs are expected to spearhead gender integration in policy making, legislations and regulations, and planning and implementation of programmes in their respective organisations [[**3**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B3-sustainability-13-10290),**[4](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22B4-sustainability-13-10290%22%20%5Co%20%22)**]. However, the GFP structure has not yielded the anticipated results of institutionalising gender within organisations. Agricultural research projects and programmes have largely remained “gender-blind” in design and implementation [[**5**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B5-sustainability-13-10290)], which limits gender equitable outcomes. This points to some unanswered questions regarding what is necessary to achieve gender responsive agricultural research targets. In reference to African agricultural research organisations, some scholars have described the institutionalisation of gender as ‘cosmetic’ and ‘business as usual’ rather than transformative [[**4**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B4-sustainability-13-10290),[**6**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B6-sustainability-13-10290),[**7**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B7-sustainability-13-10290)].

The underlying factors explaining underperformance of the GFP structures are not well documented; yet this would inform refinement of the strategy for enhanced effectiveness. This paper contributes to filling this gap by interrogating the operationalisation of the GFP structures in two sub-Saharan Africa agricultural research organisations–Uganda’s National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) and the Rwanda Agricultural Board (RAB). Specifically, we trace the story of GFP structures in these organisations, illuminating how shortcomings in formal institutions explained its performance.

Institutions have been defined as the ‘rules of the game’ of society [[**8**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B8-sustainability-13-10290),[**9**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B9-sustainability-13-10290)] which constitute a framework of norms, rules, and enforcement mechanisms. We conceptualise formal institutions as the written rules, guidelines, and policies that structure an organisation’s interactions and activities, distinguishing them from informal institutions that encompass “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” [[**10**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B10-sustainability-13-10290),[**11**](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/18/10290/htm#B11-sustainability-13-10290)].