

Let's ~~not~~ talk about a gender

“43% of the agricultural labor force in developing countries are women.”

 **Uschi Kölzer**
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WHO IS USCHI KÖLZER?

Can you elaborate a bit about your background? (city / countryside; formation, etc)

I studied at the university of Bonn, it was about 50km away from my parents place. Bonn is a wonderful mid-size city which is re-known for agronomy. The university offers a variety of possibilities for specialization in that field. I choose “plant production” because I was really fascinated by how the food we eat is produced. So, I became an agronomist. I wanted to understand how plants grow, how to identify diseases and what we can do to keep crops healthy. Food concerns everyone.

What was your experience at the university?

I did study in Bonn, where I would say my classes comprised of 60% men and 40 % Women. A lot of women with whom I did started studying switched study program to reorient towards nutrition science. At the end, the ratio was closer to 70/30. For my final thesis I had the chance to travel abroad to study at UC Davis in California and be part of a world class cursus in agronomy. Here the diversity of gender and cultural backgrounds was much higher than in Bonn.

That trend experienced during my study at Bonn however did not confirm in my working field later. When I started to work, I joined a contract research organisation where I mainly worked in a laboratory. And there, the majority of the staff was composed of women.

Do you feel that your career would have been different if you were a man?

Here I want to mention an experience I had at an early stage of my career. I originally applied for an organisation performing research in the field. Although I had all the qualifications and they liked my profile, they were doubting that I was the best choice for performing on the ground field work. In field research, you are supposed to handle heavy equipment and tasks can sometimes be physical, so they decided that a woman wasn't a good fit. On top of that came also other considerations, for instance I was at the age where women usually get pregnant.

That was the only moment where I felt that something was placed out my reach. But I am now perfectly fine with what happened. I knew that there were still many other possibilities and I like very much where I am now, so I don't have any frustration.

Why have you chosen this company?

I applied at Bayer right after my studies. But there were no open position at that time. So I started working at a contract organisation and later on in a consultancy that was working in close relation with Bayer. Actually, it was Bayer that eventually asked me to join them!

I considered it favourably because Bayer is such a large group. They deal with many aspects I am interested in. Also, they employ very qualified people and experts who are highly motivated and engaged which is great to work with. It is a very enriching work environment. It gives you the opportunity to co-create with colleagues and take on any possible challenge.

Many people join right after their studies, but I consider myself lucky to have had other work experiences. It is really a plus when it comes to put things in perspective.

Would you say agriculture is really a men's world, or do you see more women in this industry as well?

I have spent now nearly 20 years in the wider area of agricultural. On the field, for my point of view, it is still a man dominated area. But it is changing. I see that more and more women are joining. For instance, Bayer co-created together with the World Farm Organization a training course called "Gymnasium" enabling young farmers to learn and be part of policy making at different levels and on different topics. Here we really push to achieve a gender balanced classroom. It is important that women take part of the decision making. We really seek an equal proportion of men/women to induce an inclusive mindset. It is important that also men consider that women are an important part of the agricultural environment. Both parts can complement each other tremendously and build a stronger future.

We see it also in the projects we oversee in the developing countries: when women are informed, trained and able to take make their own decision, it will have a direct impact on the their families and their communities. Economic independent women are more likely to send their kids to school, but more importantly, they will set a precedent for future generations. Empowering woman can only work if we involve the community and in particular the men. We do need to overcome the social constrains women face within their communities. Otherwise, we will not be able to create a healthy environment for their families and a better future for the next generation.

Can you mention a few of the gender equality measures that your company have in place ? which one do you believe is the best / most efficient ?

To illustrate that I will pick from our field initiatives. In developing countries 43% of the agricultural work force are women. In addition, the size of women-owned farms is generally half to 2/3 of that of the men-owned farms. Women have only limited access to loans or trainings. This has many causes. According to FAO 2/3 of the worlds illiterate adults are women. But there are also social constrains making it difficult for women to attend trainings performed by man or buying agricultural inputs in shops owned by men. We can work on that.

In the Tomato growing area in Jharkhand, India fields are cultivated by women while their husbands look for job opportunities in cities. But women are reluctant to take

on trainings given by men, so we tried to tackle that within our Better Life Farming project, applying a gender sensitive approach. This project is entrepreneur centered. The intervention was to include women throughout the ecosystem by activating 3 women agri-consultants and 2 women agri-entrepreneurs in a prove-of-concept exercise. Participating female agri-entrepreneurs have their own shops and cater 5-6 villages in that area with agricultural inputs and training activities... The project is still at an early stage, but we sense that this can really make a difference in empowering women. We are really proud of this initiative.

In my job as food security manager, I take a closer look at what are the underlying causes of food insecurity and how we can build a better future in a sustainable manner, meaning staying within planetary boundaries. Providing access to innovation and modern agricultural practices from seeds, chemical and biological pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation to training is how we want to improve the livelihood of small holder farmers in developing countries. One important step is to find the right partners to scale our activities on the ground. We cannot do this alone, it needs to be a collaborative approach.

One of Bayer sustainability commitment is to reach 100 million small holder farmers in developing countries e.g. with training, access to inputs, access to markets. We are confident that a considerable share of these 100 million will be women farmers. Women are the backbone of agriculture, but the distribution of the workload is not in their favour. They have to deal with the household chores in many cases on top of ensuring that enough food is available to feed the family. This makes it more difficult for women to reach their "productivity" potential. It is a competitive disadvantage.

What could they do as next step? What should agribusinesses be doing better?

We need to understand what are the gender-based constraints all along the value chain and increase the visibility of the work women are performing. Empowerment is important but it is not the only key. Understanding the whole "ecosystem role" of women in a community is necessary if we want to work towards gender equality. It does not make sense to just empower women for the sake of empowerment (like push a women to work in a male dominated area, as it is the most profitable one) But you need to consider the socio-economic context to understand where we can help creating an enabling environment for women to grow.

For instance, in Ivory Coast, we identified such opportunity. Here we do work with many cooperatives growing cocoa. Cocoa growing is traditionally done by men. Women normally use small plots of land close to their home produce food to feed the family or support the men e.g during harvesting. We offered 2-3 women per cooperative the chance to participate in a project where we rented 1Ha of land. We trained women to use hybrid seeds, good agricultural practices and safe use of plant protection product. Also, we trained them to perform product quality check and connected them to supermarkets which bought roughly 95% of the products grown by the women. These women were able to increase their knowledge and their productivity, they diversified the crops they grow, and they still have enough food to feed their families.

This project increased the visibility of the work women are performing, increased their knowledge and their access to inputs as well as to the market and by that increased their earning potential. These women are now more empowered to make their own decisions. It is part of a long-term process to reach a more gender inclusive future.

The consideration of the whole ecosystem also goes with health consideration. For instance, how to enhance the access to primary health services or contraceptives. As an immediate COVID-19 response, we developed packages including health and agriculture products combined with digital solutions and trainings. We are in the process of donating these packages to more than 2 million small holder farmers in acute need in developing countries. We estimate that the products we distributed will contribute to the feeding of 10 million people and will help to avoid that the covid crisis turns into a hunger crisis. A good proportion of these donations will be giving to support female small holder farmer. Bayer is a health science company, so our combined efforts in consumer care and CropScience in this holistic approach came naturally.

YOUR MESSAGE

What would you like to say to decision makers?

Just a couple of years ago, when you said “farmer” my mental picture was a man. Now, I am aware that there are a lot of women working in this area. To really raise the awareness about women in agriculture and to choose the most efficient measures to support them, there is no one-size-fits-all solution!

For our company, it is crucial to collaborate with local organisations. They are the ones with the knowledge of the local constraints, they act as true advisors. What are the crops, what are key elements of the value chain, etc. They point us to the areas where we can really make a difference.

Here in Europe we talk about developing countries and basically decide what’s best for them. They are barely involved in these conversations. The developing countries should be part of these discussion, and especially the young farmers. They should be part of the decisions that will influence their future. I have the impression that the voice of the farmers around the world sometimes are barely heard, whether they are men or women. Farming needs to be considered as a viable business, also in developing countries. Imagine the number of issues that have repercussions here that would be solved if agriculture was more viable in most parts of the world!

I recall the words of this woman small holder farmer during a conference: “we have been practicing agro-ecology for hundred years, and what have it brought us? Poverty. Let us have access to innovation and allow us to break the vicious circle of poverty and hunger”.



Uschi Kölzer is Food Security Manager at Bayer CropScience. In her function, she is responsible for leading Bayer’s approach in supporting improved food security in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Her major focus in her position is to support the gender-smart approach of Bayer, developing a food loss and waste curriculum and advocating for modern agriculture and innovation in the frame of sustainable agriculture.