Focus and impact on gender equality, youth, and social inclusion

Objective: Advancing gender equality and enhancing opportunities for emerging women leaders in water, energy, food, and environmental systems

Today, we face multiple interlinked global challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and large inequities in access to resources, which contribute, in turn, to growing food and nutrition insecurity, water stress, and energy poverty. The CGIAR Initiative on NEXUS Gains works at the critical intersection of water, energy, food, and environmental systems in selected transboundary river basins to realize multiple development benefits and reduce trade-offs.

NEXUS Gains works to achieve positive, measurable benefits across all five CGIAR Impact Areas, as outlined in the CGIAR Strategy to 2030: nutrition, health, and food security; poverty reduction, livelihoods, and jobs; gender equality, youth, and social inclusion; climate adaptation and mitigation; and environmental health and biodiversity. A key element of the nexus approach is understanding that impacts in one Impact Area can affect outcomes – positively or negatively – in all others.



Farmers working in a paddy field in Nepal. Photo by Nabin Baral/IWMI.

Achieving water–energy–food–ecosystems (WEFE) nexus goals does not just mean solving technical problems, but shifting the structures and relations that keep these problems locked in place. The social and economic fabric of the nexus is woven through with entrenched inequalities. Worldwide, 36 percent of working women and 38 percent of working men are engaged in agrifood systems. Women, moreover, play key roles in ensuring water, food, and energy security. However, they are too often locked out of decision-making over access to land and natural resources, irrigation, and energy technologies. Women are also professionals, activists, and entrepreneurs in WEFE sectors, but here too they encounter structural barriers and discriminatory working cultures. Young women and other young people face their own barriers, and are frequently left out of employment and opportunity in low- and middle-income countries.

Given these realities, WEFE interventions will not automatically advance equality or inclusion, and may even inadvertently accentuate inequality if not carefully designed and implemented. As one of the few WEFE programs that incorporates a specific focus on gender, NEXUS Gains uses people-centered approaches to prioritize the well-being and strategic interests of women, youth, and marginalized groups. This Impact Area brief shares examples from some of the initiative's work packages.



Women on the bank of the Narmada river, India.
Photo by Hamish John Appleby/IWMI.

Work Package 3:
Energizing food and water systems sustainably and inclusively

Co-developing scalable business and finance models for accelerated, inclusive access to clean energy in rural areas, focusing on women and other marginalized groups.

Clean energy technologies can improve the access and incomes of smallholder farmers, but these solutions are less likely to reach rural women farmers and other marginalized groups. Barriers such as limited knowledge of appropriate energy solutions, the fragmented development of water and energy interventions, and a lack of suitable business and finance models to reach marginalized farmers, hinder the widespread adoption of clean energy. In response, NEXUS Gains seeks effective pathways for women, young people, and marginalized communities to access renewable energy in ways that promote their agency and entrepreneurial growth.

Work Package 3 focuses on analyzing the impact of alternative rural energy systems on poverty alleviation, gendered benefit streams, women's empowerment, well-being, and new jobs for women, youth, and marginalized communities in renewable energy and agro-processing. NEXUS Gains also aims to co-develop inclusive business and finance models to scale clean rural energy solutions while fostering greater empowerment for women.

In addition to tools and analyses in support of rural women's access to clean energy access and use, NEXUS Gains has also analyzed government institutions in Nepal to strengthen benefits from existing gender strategies in the energy sector. Findings include the importance of strengthening human resources dedicated to equality and social inclusion, a call for a broader conceptual framing, and a need for more resources dedicated to the implementation of existing policies at both the national and sub-national levels.

THE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN ENERGY SCORE

In recent years, many initiatives have focused on the intersection of gender and energy access in rural areas, aiming to provide clean and affordable energy solutions such as solar power and clean cookstoves. However, the benefits of accessing such energy technologies cannot be assumed; they must be systematically assessed. NEXUS Gains has worked extensively to identify pathways from women's energy access to various benefit streams by collecting data on rural energy sources, access, and use portfolios in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. This data has contributed to the development and field testing of the Women's Empowerment in Energy Index, a tool designed to measure changes in women's agency resulting from access to alternative energy portfolios. Moving forward, NEXUS Gains will use the index to identify sites and modalities for pilot projects on energy access in India and Nepal.

Work Package 4:
Strengthening WEFE nexus governance

Enhancing the governance of natural resources through more effective multistakeholder platforms and social learning interventions.

NEXUS Gains encourages integrated governance approaches that consider the needs and contributions of women, who are typically underrepresented in decision-making processes related to water, energy, food, and ecosystems. To address this, the initiative conducts research to strengthen the voice and agency of multiple stakeholders, particularly women, in groundwater governance and cross-sectoral multistakeholder platforms. This builds on previous work within and beyond CGIAR.

Through literature reviews and an international workshop on multistakeholder platforms, NEXUS Gains has gained valuable insights on ways to improve the inclusion of women and marginalized groups in WEFE governance. Additionally, webinars have facilitated revealing discussions on the role of masculinities in the water sector. These efforts have contributed to guidance on enhancing the effectiveness of multistakeholder platforms to promote integrated, inclusive WEFE nexus management. NEXUS Gains links technical and policy measures with social learning interventions, such as behavioral games, to improve both the equity and effectiveness of surface and groundwater governance.

GROUNDWATER GOVERNANCE TOOLBOX

NEXUS Gains, in collaboration with the Foundation for Ecological Security, is co-developing a groundwater governance toolbox that incorporates innovative uses of games for experiential learning to improve inclusive governance of communities' valuable groundwater resources. Recent results indicate that women who engage in these games are more likely to contribute to choosing what crops to grow, suggesting that such games can provide a means to strengthen women's empowerment in decision-making processes. Additionally, NEXUS Gains is investigating the extent to which women's participation in games that simulate surface water irrigation can contribute to better outcomes in terms of maintenance of local storage facilities and dispute resolution, further strengthening the role of women in water management.

Work Package 5:
Developing capacity for WEFE actors, including emerging women leaders

Supporting capacity-strengthening efforts for improved WEFE nexus practices that target professionals working in ministries and local government organizations, the private sector, agricultural extension services, civil society, NGOs, and academia.

Lack of capacity is a major obstacle to achieving transformative systems change, particularly in empowering women professionals within the WEFE nexus. NEXUS Gains has identified various capacity constraints that limit women professionals voice and influence in these sectors, which have been highlighted through scoping studies and capacity needs assessments in Nepal, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan.



Head of a Water Users' Association in Tajikistan meets with farmers.
Photo by Neil Palmer/IWMI.

The first study in Nepal led to the creation of the WEFE Nexus Leadership Program, which mainly targets women professionals in WEFE sectors. This program focuses on strengthening their general and technical skills to apply nexus approaches, incorporating gender considerations into those approaches, and addressing structural inequalities within their own institutions. The program is developing a cadre of women champions – initially in Nepal, while creating learning tools and approaches that can easily be extended elsewhere.

In parallel, NEXUS Gains is working to strengthen the capacity of all actors to ensure gender-responsive implementation of the WEFE nexus approach. Examples include online learning content specifically focused on gender equality and social inclusion in WEFE nexus approaches, and integration of gender and inclusion considerations as key components of WEFE nexus masterclasses, advanced schools, and in a trio of nexus courses for practitioners, government, and graduate students. Gender and inclusion have been at the center of NEXUS Gains' capacity-strengthening efforts, which target both women and men with a range of learning resources, training events, and communities of practice that support a growing cadre of emerging WEFE nexus champions.

WEFE NEXUS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Women professionals in WEFE sectors shared their experiences of exclusion and frustration in NEXUS Gains' scoping study in Nepal. Interviewees stressed the need for increased confidence to lead in a work environment built and controlled by men, as well as capacity to advance WEFE nexus science and solutions. Informed by this study, the WEFE Nexus Leadership Program was launched in June 2023 as a collaboration between GREAT International, Governance Lab, IWMI, and the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT. The program combines transformational learning, which reshapes participants' perspectives of their work, with experiential learning, which enables participants to apply new ideas and internalize the learning. A mentorship program further supports their development. The program covers a range of topics from nexus science to discussions on workplace gender dynamics and methods of transformative leadership. While most participants and mentors are women, men are also included to promote change across WEFE sectors, particularly in advancing gender equality and social inclusion. Initially launched in Kathmandu, the program is designed for expansion to other regions of Nepal, including provincial and sub-provincial (local) levels, and to other countries, with the help of a published training manual.



Farmer in East Africa. Photo by Neil Palmer/CIAT.

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