
Accelerating Impact

Accelerating Investments in Women through Certification

By Jeannette Gurung, PhD, Exexecutive Director, WOCAN, and Rebecca Pearl-Martinez, an energy, climate change and environment consultant and founding board member of WOCAN



Courtesy of WOCAN

What is W+

W+ represents a new and innovative option for a certification system that channels measureable and verifiable benefits directly to women and women's organizations in developing nations. The W+ Standard (W+) is designed to incentivize investments in women's empowerment through a system that both measures results and puts money into the hands of women. In addition to the benefits for women themselves, this is likely to have transformative impacts on gender inequality, the economy, poverty, and climate change and food security, among other issues. The W+ Standard is a set of project design and implementation requirements that provides contributors the opportunity to accelerate progress for women and gender equality.

The W+ Standard was developed by WOCAN (Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management), a women-led not-for-profit that builds capacity for gender integration and women's leadership, in response to the significant lack of investment in women and women's organizations that impedes global goals for sustainable development. According to the World Bank, only two cents of every dollar in international aid funding goes to support programs for girls. A separate study by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (2014) found that the majority (73 percent) of initiatives supporting women and girls do not engage women's organizations as partners. Women's organizations only receive nine percent of the funding, even though they have "historically been closest to transforming the position of women and girls in societies."

Why Invest in Women's Organizations and Groups

First, they focus on gender inequality, the most pervasive of inequalities. These organizations understand that empowering women can transform households, communities and the economy, and they often target the most disadvantaged segment of society. Second, they are organizations run by women for women. Third, these institutions provide critical support, particularly in times of need marked by food insecurity or weather extremes linked to climate change. Studies show that while families and peer groups provide the first line of support to households in times of need, formal institutions—such as affinity groups, federations, cooperatives, or NGOs—are the most accessible and

Jeannette Gurung, PhD is a forester and gender and development expert whose career has focused on leading organizational change for gender equality within agriculture and natural resource management organizations in Asia and Africa. She is founder and director of [WOCAN](#).

Rebecca Pearl-Martinez is an energy, climate change, and environment consultant, based in Boston, who focuses on policy-oriented research and strategy, with 18 years of experience in the international sustainable development sector.

effective institutions providing support at times of stress. Acting as institutional safety nets, these groups provide access to land resources, micro-credit, technical inputs, or links to the next level of public institutions such as local government. Finally, women's groups usually do not have the connections to attract enough resources to accomplish their mission, and thus channeling funds to these organizations is a uniquely rewarding opportunity for contributors and investors who are attracted to their mission. Due to meager funds available, many women's organizations are shifting their fundraising approaches away from grants — a 2010 study of 1,100 women's organizations from 140 countries found that one-third depend on income generation as their primary source of support.

The gap in investment in women's organizations and women-led businesses is likely prolonging or worsening gender gaps and women's potential to contribute to the economy. A country's national competitiveness correlates strongly with its gender gap, according to the World Economic Forum. Also, emerging research demonstrates the economic potential of investing in women and women-led entities.

Why Putting Money in Women's Hands is Critical

The purpose of W+ is to provide resources that women control, and resources for women's empowerment activities. Directly receiving income can transform women's lives in the following ways:

- *Entrepreneurship and investing in financial security:* Women need loans for small businesses and financial services, or the ability to save for building a business.
- *Decision-making:* Women who earn an income are more likely to be able to make decisions about how household money is allocated.
- *Safety and wellbeing:* Owning assets and holding the title to those assets is important, and title ownership correlates to reductions in domestic violence.
- *Family education:* Women need a way to save for school fees and to reduce economic shocks that can result in removing a child from school.
- *Resilience:* Having cash along with other resources is a critical component of resilience for women when their communities must respond to external challenges such as weather events related to climate change and food insecurity.

In the international development community, it is widely observed that women are more likely to reinvest this revenue in family and community, which can extend the social impact of investments targeting women, while men are more likely to spend more funds on entertainment and recreation.

How women invest the income they receive (beyond any benefits that income-generating projects provide) is where the innovation, creativity, and transformation of women's economic agency happens. Women need resources to invest beyond basic household needs. While finance is a central barrier to women's entrepreneurship, they also face non-financial barriers, including time available for entrepreneurial activities, intra-household bargaining, restrictions on mobility, human capital, infrastructure, etc. Since women face gender imbalances that place restrictions on their starting and building businesses, the influx of significant resources could provide the additional income and other assets that women need to invest and take the risk. This is why direct share payments to women are required by W+, on top of any project-sourced income.

How W+ Works

Contributors can benefit from the W+ through three primary ways:

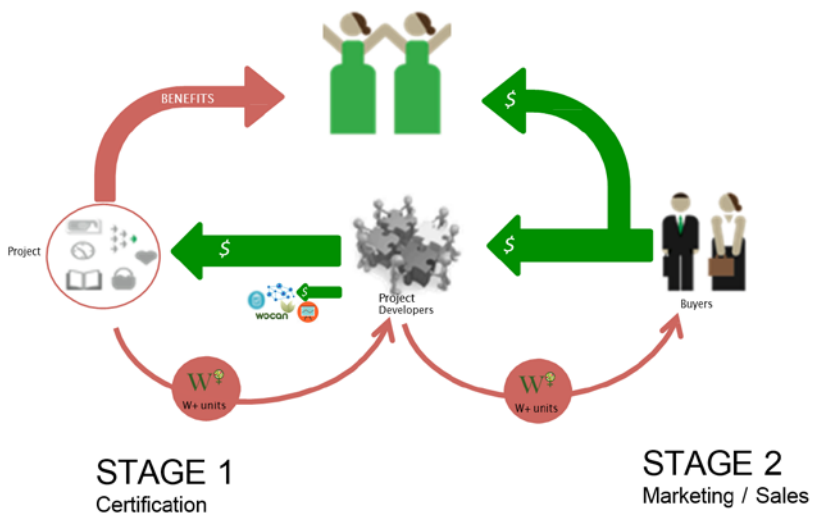
- Purchasing W+ units provides corporations, individuals and investors with quantified results of women benefitted that can count towards internal targets for women's empowerment.
- Corporations and investors can seek higher profits from W+ labeled products and services
- Financial institutions can provide loans to organizations producing W+ units for the market.

W+ is creating a new market for gender capital that is drawing the attention of impact investors, corporations, the CSR community and international development agencies. Moving beyond conventional aid to innovative results-based financing, the W+ is a "gender accelerator" that facilitates the application of a gender approach at scale for the growing ecosystem of actors in impact investing as well as corporations that are looking to add value to their supply chains and brands. W+ is applicable to a wide range of economic development and environmental projects, including but not limited to forestry, renewable energy, clean water and agriculture.

The W+ Standard consists of a set of project design and implementation requirements that can also complement other certification systems and standards such as Fair Trade, Voluntary Carbon Standard, the Gold Standard, etc. The W+ tracks women's empowerment in six areas—Time, Income & Assets, Health, Leadership, Education & Knowledge, and Food Security—and each certified project measures progress in at least one of these domains.

The measurement of results in these domains yields quantified W+ units that contributors can purchase in order to demonstrate the outcomes achieved through their contributions in these areas, and to channel funds to women beneficiaries and their groups. Companies can use the W+ label for their W+ certified activities along a supply chain, bringing higher prices/premiums to women suppliers at the sourcing level.

To embark on W+ certification, existing or new projects or initiatives assess how the W+ can be integrated into the project and submit a Project Idea Note (PIN). Project developers then produce a Project Design Document to be registered through the W+ system. Once projects



are underway, their outcomes are monitored and measured, and then verified by an accredited external auditor. Projects that obtain satisfactory results are issued W+ certificates for a specific number of units, which are listed in the W+ registry. Project developers may choose to then sell these units to corporations, investors or individual buyers, but must also make Direct Share Payments to women beneficiaries. The pricing of each project's units is calculated based on a formula that captures how projects have impacted women's lives—for example, the W+ Time Unit for a biogas project in Nepal was calculated using the country's living wage for an eight hour day. For each Unit, 50 percent of the unit price is channeled back to local women's groups in the project community in the form of Direct Share Payment, through a reliable financial institution. The remaining amount covers the costs of the project developer, auditor, administration, and provides a profit margin to project developers.

Standards need support especially from private sector stakeholders to develop the ecosystem, and to build the market demand for the W+ certification that will drive investments in women's empowerment and set off a chain of impacts through multiplier effects. Commitments from major companies and cornerstone investors are needed in order to raise the bar and attract the collaboration of a diverse set of actors in both public and private sectors.

To find out more about W+, visit wplus.org. 