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A Crack in the Ceiling: Revealing Outcomes for Women's Leadership in Forest and Agricultural Landscape Initiatives

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WHY WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IS IMPORTANT IN FOREST AND AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE PROJECTS

Gender equality and women's empowerment in sustainable food and land use efforts can lead to:

- Higher agriculture production and profits, improved economic outcomes, and a fairer distribution of wealth
- Better ecosystems conservation, protection, and sustainability outcomes
- Higher CO₂ emissions reductions and better resilience outcomes.

Gender-neutral programs undermine conservation goals and human rights; therefore, making women's contributions visible and rewarding them is essential to achieving environmental and social sustainability aims. Strengthening women's leadership in groups working together to improve their livelihoods, as well as in community, district, and national decision-making bodies affecting natural resource management has been shown to yield positive results.

Agricultural and forest policies affect rural women in many unseen ways compared to men, including their daily schedules and workloads. Many community-led forest

groups, for example, determine restrictions or allowances of local fuelwood collection and the use of non-timber forest products. This affects women's ability to collect non-timber forest products and fuelwood critical to rural household livelihoods and food security.

FOLUR GENDER PILLAR OFFERS A FOUNDATION FOR GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEMS CHANGE

The Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration (FOLUR) Impact Program is a US\$345 million, seven-year initiative funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and led by the World Bank.

Seeking to transform food and land use systems, the program comprises a global platform and 27 country projects. Country-level work focuses on accelerating action in landscapes and along value chains for eight major commodities: cocoa, coffee, livestock, maize, palm oil, rice, soy, and wheat. The thematic pillars upon which the project is based include sustainable agriculture, land restoration, private sector engagement, and gender inclusion.

The global platform provides technical assistance, training, and knowledge products to FOLUR partners and country

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project teams. Recognizing that more targeted efforts are required to address the under-representation of women in environmental and agricultural agencies, as well as project teams that design and implement solutions to environmental degradation and livelihood challenges, this platform supports testing of innovative approaches that boost women's active participation and leadership. Ultimately, greater equality can contribute to the global transformation of food systems.

FOLUR country projects are incubators of change. Gender inclusiveness is embedded in each project, and managers continue to determine the best ways to support rural women in their efforts to achieve empowerment and economic justice.

FOLUR does not operate in isolation, but instead engages across a range of programs and projects as part of a broad network of core partners and implementing agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations; Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU); Global Landscapes Forum (GLF); Good Growth Partnership (GGP), led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); and International Finance Corporation (IFC).

In this second FOLUR Practical Note, we share strategies deployed across a select spectrum of projects in recent years, each of which aims to make these ideals a reality.¹ Although disparate, they all shine a light on the challenges women face as leaders.

¹ *Enhancing Effectiveness of Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration Projects through Gender-Responsive Actions*. FOLUR Practical Note. <https://www.folur.org/knowledge/enhancing-effectiveness-food-systems-land-use-and-restoration-projects-through-gender>

A TOOL FOR CATALYZING AND MEASURING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP

The W+ Standard is a certification framework to measure, quantify, and verify the empowerment of women, and reward them via a market-based mechanism, known as W+ credits, thereby ensuring environmental benefits while fostering sustainable development.

Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN) developed the W+ Standard in 2014, in consultation with rural women in Nepal and Kenya, to identify six domains that are critical for women's empowerment: time, income and assets, health, education and knowledge, food security, and leadership.

Each domain has established qualitative and quantitative indicators that are used as a basis for determining impact. Women within the communities participate in the assessment and contribute to making adjustments.

The W+ approach can provide social and financial returns to impact investors. It supports companies and investors to pre-finance women's empowerment projects. This can help fulfil their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments, while investors generate revenue by issuing and selling W+ credits.

OUTCOMES OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP EFFORTS IN AGRICULTURE AND FOREST LANDSCAPE PROJECTS

The W+ approach is innovative because it allows project teams to show, in a transparent and robust way, what investments and activities aimed at strengthening women's leadership lead to in terms of tangible changes in behavior or outcomes. In conjunction with FOLUR, the World Bank-led Global Partnership for Sustainable and Resilient Landscapes, PROGREEN, initiated an assessment of outcomes related to women's empowerment and leadership, which was led by WOCAN and piloted in Nepal and Mexico. Here, we share these results, as well as findings from a similar assessment in India supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Key lessons learned, relevant to project implementers and future project designers everywhere, include:

- Women seize leadership platforms when opportunities are present.

- Enhanced leadership skills shift ideas of womanhood away from purely domestic to public-oriented images.
- Women leaders exercise tempered leadership to ensure that they extend—but do not break—sociocultural boundaries.
- It is important that project implementing staff have grassroots experience and intimate knowledge of the local context.
- Higher level project team members need to function as “translators” that mediate between the cultural mores and knowledge systems of the donor reporting requirements and local community groups.
- Mentorship support plays an important role well beyond the life of a project.

Nepal Projects Enhance Women’s Leadership

Since 1980, Nepal’s Community Forest User Group (CFUG) initiatives, supported by national policies, have featured decentralized, community-based natural resource management; community forest monitoring; and local leadership. They are widely seen as a successful model of local forest governance that addresses deforestation and land degradation. Mandatory gender quotas were first instituted in Nepal’s community forestry programs by the country’s Master Plan for the Forestry Sector in 1989 and the Community Forestry Guidelines in 1995 and were later reinforced in subsequent versions of the guidelines.

The WOCAN team applied the W+ Standard and its Leadership Domain to gather evidence on the extent of change in women’s leadership, arising from several initiatives within Nepal’s CFUGs of the Community Forestry program, in December 2023. The assessment found that a range of project activities led to enhanced leadership results, rather than stemming from a single leadership training. These initiatives included capacity development interventions on sustainable forest management, networking with peers and mentors at the regional and national levels, and participation in political discussions and forums.

The leadership assessment using the W+ methodology was applied to three districts, selected to represent a microcosm of the social and geographic differences across Nepal. Results were measured for 7,750 women leaders and forest user group members. The results showed an average improvement of 39 percent in

women leaders’ personal transformations and the changes they led in their CFUGs over the past 40 years. The implications of such leadership-related changes found here and elsewhere will be explored in more depth below.

Women’s Income, Leadership, and Assets Grow Under Mexico Initiative

The Dedicated Grant Mechanism (DGM) for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) is an initiative implemented by Rainforest Alliance Mexico, with support from the World Bank Forest Investment Program (FIP). This initiative started in the states of Oaxaca, Campeche, Yucatan, Quintana Roo, and Jalisco in 2017.

The DGM has been supporting IPLC subprojects aimed at conservation and integration of sustainable land management practices, with a goal of improving key gender equality outcomes, including:

- Access to and control over productive assets
- Voice and agency
- Positive changes in women’s leadership and participation in decision-making.

PROGREEN and FOLUR support has helped build local capacity to apply the W+ Standard in Mexico. An assessment was carried out that measures results related to women’s leadership, as well as income and assets in four DGM subprojects. Planning is underway to scale this effort widely to include many more women involved in additional subprojects.

Actions targeted at women project beneficiaries included financial and technical capacity development activities to develop the skills necessary for participants to practice leadership and to market their products and improve their income. The results of the assessment showed that the training program had a profound impact on participants, significantly enhancing their leadership capabilities, particularly in the areas of project design, facilitation, and communication.

The use of the W+ methodology enabled the assessors to measure a 40 percent increase in the area of women’s leadership, a 52 percent increase in income and assets, and a 120 percent increase in education and knowledge across these subprojects from 2017–24. This in turn generated a total of 13,911 W+ credits for 653 women.

Post-training, the women beneficiaries of the DGM initiative demonstrated a clear increase in their engagement with leadership-specific activities, such as training, mobilizing, and supporting group members, while also stepping into roles related to community governance and networking.

W+ in India Boosts Women's Income and Assets

A women-led community resilient local governance project, Women-Led Community Resilient Local Governance (wCOREL), has been developed by the Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP), a nongovernmental organization in Maharashtra, India, formed in 1998.

The project involves climate-resilient farming that includes organic cultivation of multiple indigenous food crops, as well as livelihood diversification training to ensure household health, nutrition, and income security. Activities aimed at strengthening women's leadership have included training in bookkeeping, financial reporting, data collection, and how to take minutes and keep records at meetings. Women also received trainings on land preparation and use of their own seeds, including storage, germination, and sowing methods with new technologies. Women's capacities were further strengthened in soil fertility management and learning how to prepare bio fertilizers and pesticides, including pest control methods and storage. Additionally, women received support to create market linkages community groups aimed at increasing their access to the market.

wCOREL is transforming the lives of 75,000 historically marginalized women farmers and their families in high climate-risk areas into resilient leaders by positioning them as agri-innovators and decision makers.

When the W+ Standard was applied to measure the outcomes of these efforts, with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the results showed a 101 percent increase in women's income and assets, and a 127 percent increase in leadership results from 2021–24. An independent verification of the W+ credits generated by these outcomes was completed in February 2024, verifying the generation of 778,286 W+ credits for 75,000 women.

Challenges to Women's Leadership in India, Mexico, and Nepal

These insights allowed the WOCAN team to determine needs for women's leadership support based on similar challenges. It found that across diverse environments, these were the types of support most frequently desired:

- Access to resources and information, as well as material support beyond the project life
- Male support and allyship for women's leadership
- Capacity development and mentorship—particularly as women leaders typically have no access to role models with similar experiences within their families and communities
- Innovative training interventions to enhance women's capacity for language to articulate their challenges and recognize counter narratives as they develop as leaders.

Indicators of Leadership

Given these findings of large, positive changes in several proxy indicators of women's empowerment, such as leadership, income, and assets, it is useful to get a better understanding of just what these mean, particularly with regard to leadership. Understanding and measuring leadership, and how it has changed as a result of project actions, is quite complex. Leadership is not only about exercising the authority of the formal position granted to leaders, but is also about the exercise of relational skills such as listening, mutuality, and reciprocity to bring about change.

The result is that leadership action evolves from changes in the behavior and perception of individuals, who then act



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Table 1. Specific Indicators of Outcomes Related to an Individual’s Transformation

OUTCOMES	INDICATORS
Recognizing resistance from peers and management	Tokenism
Managing sociocultural challenges and obstacles	Number of hours women work Degree of mobility Norms and values
Dealing with emotional challenges	Ability to articulate predicaments Strategies to deal with predicaments
Generating counter narratives	Alternative stories about themselves
Engaging with obstacles	Quality of decision-making

to change structure. Thus, structural change and individual transformation exist in a dialectical relationship, where each acts on the other to produce leadership outcomes.

Indicators of outcomes related to structural change in groups also correspond to changes in policy direction, which may manifest in shifts to gender-responsive budgeting or gender-sensitive terms of reference for group or committee positions, for example.

Indicators of individual change include an increase in the confidence bestowed by others on the leader, a more inclusive approach or expansion in group decision-making processes, and the number of colleagues who are influenced by the new leaders. Specific indicators of outcomes related to an individual’s transformation are shown in table 1.

Lessons on Measuring Outcomes of Women’s Leadership Initiatives

Practical application of the leadership domain of the W+ Standard requires substantial understanding of leadership concepts and practices by those designing the requisite survey prior to data collection, while also providing accurate evidence to substantiate behavioral, psychological, and social outcomes.

The Mexico assessment highlighted the importance of the team implementing the project having both technical capacities and a strong knowledge and commitment to the local context.

In Nepal, the results showed that enhanced leadership produces shifting ideas of womanhood, from purely domestic to more outside- or public-oriented perceptions. It was also found that women leaders in the community forest groups were strategically engaging with newly recognized or developed opportunities, particularly through engagement in local elections that established many of these women as regional and national-level politicians.²

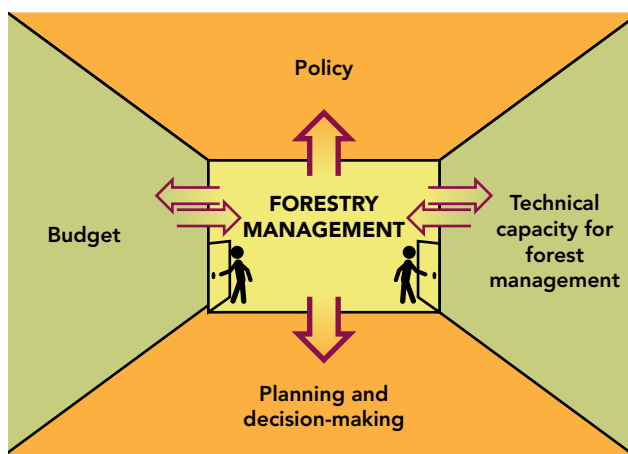
In both Nepal and Mexico, these positive leadership results came with caveats, specifically challenges of leadership, including social isolation and glass ceilings facing women within established group structures, which inhibit upward mobility. These obstacles are expressed in figure 1.

In India, project actions created stronger links between women’s groups and government officials and agencies, opening up avenues for the receipt of additional resources beyond project funds. Stronger collective action with better organized groups also provided emotional, as well as technical, support to women farmers.

In all three country assessments, men were found to be critical regarding support for women’s leadership efforts. However, most men reported that they accepted women’s leadership as long as gender roles did not change. Outside of the household, men were very worried about keeping up with the appearance that they controlled everything.

²According to the coordinator of the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN), as many as 30 women who were previously leaders of Forest User Groups have been elected to provincial or national level political bodies

Figure 1. Women Leaders Push Against Institutional Barriers



Source: WOCAN, 2024. Case study: Women’s Leadership Outcomes within Nepal’s Community Forestry Program using the W+ Standard

This was echoed by the women, who said that their husbands would support them as long as they were still taking care of household chores and the children, and they could not question this. All of the women interviewed also said that they hid a certain amount of the earnings from their husbands, so they could access this whenever they needed to, without asking for permission. Women said that this was easy because husbands had no idea how they administered the household finances or which expenses they needed to cover.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings point to the value of establishing frameworks and support for rural women leaders in land management projects through seven recommendations for project teams:

1. Give access, opportunities, resources, and power to women, as well as a dedicated budget for women’s empowerment through leadership.
2. Establish specific and rigorous criteria for project team selection.
3. Build the capacity of project teams to implement and monitor women’s empowerment activities with empathy, listening, and reciprocity skills. Skills for negotiating and influencing relevant government agencies and partners to mitigate conflicts are also necessary.
4. Support a participative leadership style by collaborating closely with project staff on all matters, ranging from

needs assessment to project design and implementation; simplify procurement mechanisms and community reporting requirements; and pay attention to local knowledge and ways to integrate this into project actions.

5. Model and support relational leadership: Leading with empathy and supporting group harmony is core to leadership practices embedded in local traditions and a worldview where governance of the land is primarily collective. This organic approach to leadership generates an enabling environment for team members’ commitment and cohesion that allows co-creation of innovative methods and tools for community outreach.
6. Provide mentoring support for community women leaders through formal or informal mechanisms.
7. Engage men as allies for women’s leadership, moving beyond conditional support.

The underlying causes of unsustainable land management practices and food value chains are the focus of programs like the FOLUR Impact Program and the new Food Systems Integrated Programme (FSIP), led by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

Only by factoring in the challenges faced by rural women and supporting their leadership, as well as recognizing their potential contribution to food systems at the local, regional, and national levels, can food systems transformation be fully realized.

The FOLUR gender theme is grateful for the support of the Global Environment Facility.

GET INVOLVED
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The FOLUR Impact Program consists of:

The Global Platform Project, led by the World Bank with



And 27 Country Projects shown on the map below, working with the following Implementing Agencies

