

Ensuring Women Farmers Get the Water They Need

A practical new tool for more gender-appropriate irrigation management—developed through research supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the Ford Foundation and the Government of the Netherlands.

Irrigation agencies often operate on the premise that all farmers are men, leaving women farmers with unequal access to water and no recourse for addressing the imbalance. “If male farmers have taken the irrigation turn of a woman it is difficult for her to win the battle,” reports one woman farmer from the West Gandak irrigation scheme in Nepal. “The other farmer may admit that he is wrong, but he will not change his practice.”

Ensuring women farmers have access to resources and to decision-making forums, such as Water Users Organizations, is increasingly being recognized as vital not only for women’s livelihoods but also for the health and productivity of many irrigation schemes. But the pace of reform has been slow and progress uneven. “There is still a big gap between good intentions and effective action,” says IWMI gender and water expert, Dr. Barbara van Koppen. “Policy makers and change agents need tools to help diagnose concrete gender issues in irrigation schemes and design appropriate interventions.”

To fulfill this need, IWMI researchers developed the Gender Performance Indicator for Irrigation (GPII). The Indicator has been successfully tested in nine case studies in Asia and Africa and is now being released for use worldwide.

Identifying agents for change

The GPII taps information that is typically available in intervention contexts to measure women’s and men’s relative access to irrigation at farm-

level, and to decision-making processes at forum and leadership levels. It helps to direct action by identifying the primary shapers of inclusion/exclusion that need to be targeted in order to achieve change.

The first step in applying the indicator is to determine whether farmers

cally prevailing production and institutional arrangements—something irrigation agencies can’t do alone.”

In female and dual farming systems, research has shown that irrigation agencies themselves largely determine whether women farmers are excluded or included.



In South Africa’s former homelands, an estimated 70 to 90% of farmers are women, but a much lower percentage have titles to the land they cultivate. In the National Water Act of 1998, the South African government helped open up Water Users Associations to these women farmers by removing landownership as a criterion for membership. Women are now able to demand the water they need.

in a system are predominantly female, male, or a more-or-less even mix (a dual system). This in turn determines the approach needed. An intervention successful in a female- or dual-farming system is unlikely to be effective in a male-dominated scheme and vice versa.

Van Koppen explains, “In male-dominated schemes, it is more the structure of agrarian society itself, than the policies of agencies that are responsible for the exclusion of women farmers. In these cases, to include the minority of women farmers, you have to challenge the gender-bias of the lo-

Identifying women’s needs

One of the primary reasons for the failure of previous efforts has been inappropriate targeting for gender inclusion. To successfully address exclusion of women, the intervention needs to take into account the role women already play in agriculture.

In some cases, aid organizations and NGOs have attempted to improve the situation of women by forcing blanket gender-inclusiveness onto farming systems where women do not traditionally participate, except in specific tasks such as weeding or harvesting. “Blanket measures seldom achieve anything beyond window dressing,” asserts van Koppen. “Trying to ensure that all women participating in farming get equal access to irrigation water, without regard to the type or level of participation, is unrealistic and in the end fails to reach those women whose livelihoods depend on having equal access.”

The GPII helps avoid this situation by distinguishing between women who are farm decision-makers and women who participate only in specific farming tasks. This difference is often overlooked in the formulation of ‘gender-sensitive’ projects and interventions—with the result that these fail to address the true needs of women farmers.

Related reading:

- Research Report 59: *A Gender Performance Indicator for Irrigation: Concepts, Tools and Applications*
- Contribution to World Water Vision for Food and Rural Development: *From Bucket to Basin: Poverty/Gender*
- Working Paper 8: *An Assessment of Female Participation in Minor Irrigation Systems in Sri Lanka*
- Working Paper 10: *Gender and Irrigation in India: The Women’s Irrigation Group of Jambar, South Gujarat*
- Working Paper 11: *Gender in Lift Irrigation Schemes in East Gujarat, India*
- Working Paper 15: *Women Irrigators and Leaders in the West Gandak Scheme, Nepal*

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The Gender Performance Indicator for Irrigation (GPII) MEASURES INCLUSION/EXCLUSION AT THREE LEVELS

- Women’s and men’s access to water and irrigated land at farm level
- Inclusion in irrigator’s network in which rules for infrastructure construction, operation and maintenance are set and enforced
- Eligibility and election for leadership positions and women’s capacity to function well in these roles