



INITIATIVE ON
NEXUS Gains

Gender dynamics in irrigation: making way for women leaders in Western Terai, Nepal

Sanju Koirala, National
Researcher-Social Science, Water
and Natural Resources,
International Water Management
Institute, Nepal

Context

Women produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world's food production (FAO year, 2022), yet their roles in irrigation, food production, and their contribution to household food security—have only been recently recognized.

In Nepal, male farmers interests in non agriculture sector and migration is increasing, women and elderly individuals are left behind, becoming key actors in water resources management, agricultural production, and food security.

Nepal and particularly rural Nepal is stooped into patriarchal norms and rigid hierarchies that affect access and control of resources.

Women and disadvantages groups, such as Dalits, Janjatis and Madhesis face many structural barriers and constraints to access development opportunities.

The objective of the study

The study was commissioned as a part of CGIAR Initiative on Nexus Gains, Work package 2 on Water Productivity to understand the holistic assessment of barriers and challenges to effective irrigation water management in Nepal.



This study is a part of larger study that focuses on gender barriers to hold leadership positions in Water User Associations.

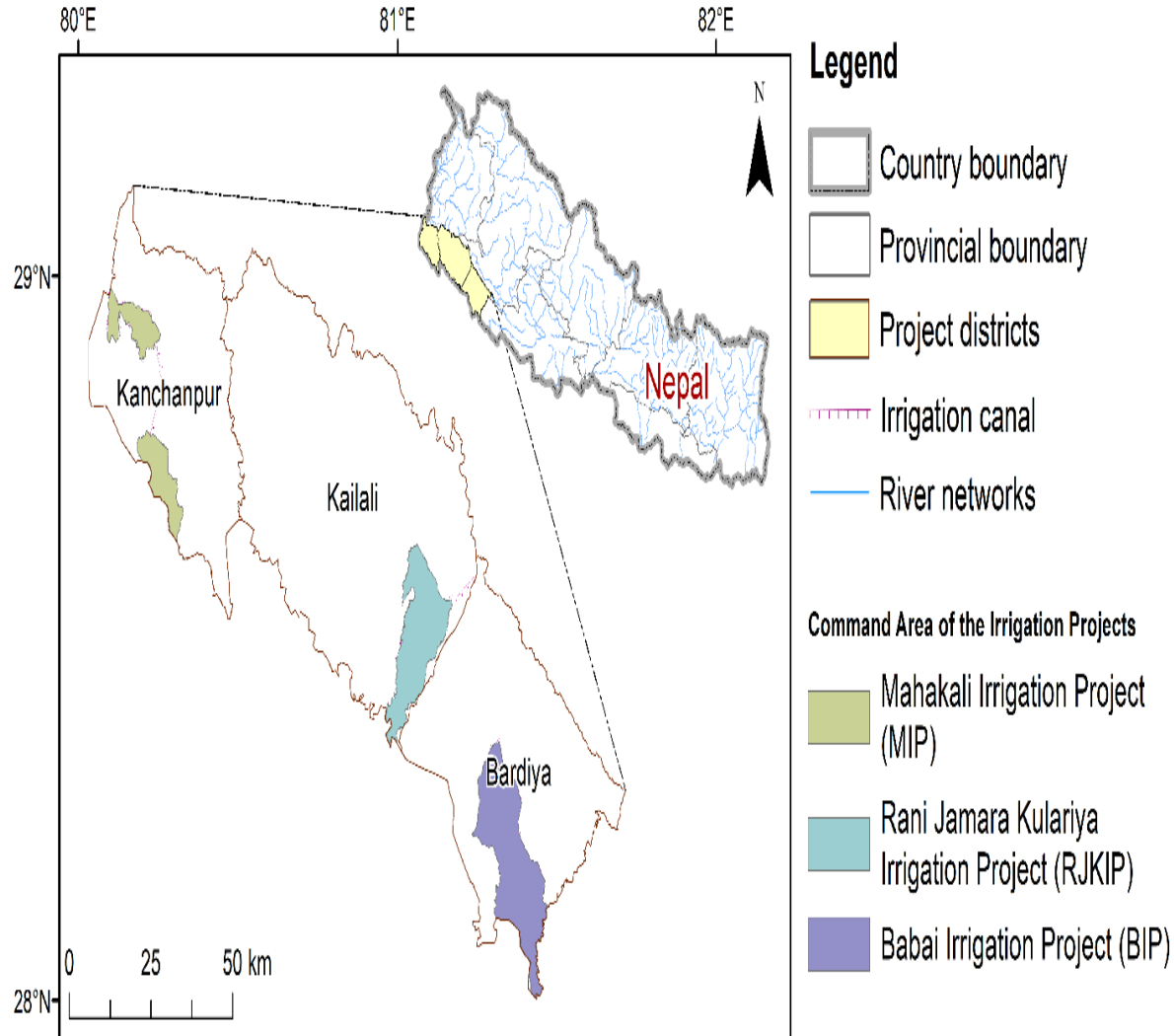
The research is based on the 10 FGDs, and 6 official meetings conducted with relevant stakeholders in Kanchanpur, Kailai and Bardiya districts located in western Terai.



Objectives of the study:

- To identify the barriers preventing women farmers from being recognized and heard, on a par with men, in the management of local water resources.
- To make recommendations to enable women farmers to lead WUAs in the future.

Study Area:



- Farmers, members and representatives of WUAs and concerned government officials of three irrigation schemes were consulted.
- In all three irrigation schemes, there are different types of WUAs with interconnected responsibilities.



Major Findings: Positive changes

- Women increasingly irrigate farms and maintain irrigation systems. For many women, accessing surface water irrigation has brought about some positive changes.

"With irrigation access, we produce more crops, including vegetables, and generate income by selling them, which helps us support our families. Increased production brought a positive impact for household food and nutrition security."

(woman, Jamara Water User Association)

- The income generation from selling crops and vegetables by female farmers has also led to a positive change in attitudes towards daughters and daughters-in-law. In many instance, they were allowed to participate in collectives.
- Women members of the WUAs have also frequently qualified for subsidized diesel or electric pumps, despite land ownership certificates being in their husband's name.
- Small-scale irrigation technologies has reduced the drudgery of some women farmers.

Findings: Struggles of women farmers



Technical and institutional barriers still prevent many women farmers from accessing information, subsidies and facilities in the study area.



Landless farmers and women from migrant households, unable to present their husband's land ownership certificates, are deprived of benefits.



In addition, the distribution of solar irrigation pumps was inequitable: most were received by well-networked women.

Findings: Women's absence in irrigation management

- The Government of Nepal's is committed to gender equality, meaningful participation of women, and gender-responsive governance. Yet, the situation on the ground is not so positive. For example, we observed gender inequality in the recruitment of staff in irrigation programs.
- Out of 16 field technicians in the management office of the Mahakali Irrigation Project, only 2 were women; and in the Rani Jamara Kulariya Irrigation Project, only 3 women technicians had been appointed.
- The women farmers stated that it would be easier for them to communicate their problems to female technicians and were disappointed that so few were available.

Findings: Women's absence in irrigation management



In all the WUAs visited, men occupied leadership positions in advisory committees; women were chosen as members and treasurers. Further, fewer Dalits occupied such positions.



Some female member of the executive committee for the Rani Kulo WUA said that even if women aspire to hold leadership positions, they are discouraged.

“Compared to the past, women participate in meetings and give applications for irrigation services, but when a committee is formed women are side-lined... Men suspect our capacity to lead, speak up in public and fulfil our responsibilities. I feel women can perform better if given a chance.” (Woman, Rani Kulo, WUA)

Findings: Women's absence in irrigation management

Traditional systems, like the Badhar system (an informal institution) where only men hold leadership/chairperson positions obstruct the women to hold such responsibility.

In one case the WUA has been led by the same man for over 40 years, after his father transferred the position to him.

This automatic capture of leadership have excluded women from planning and decision-making process.

Recommendations: Providing opportunities for women leaders in WUAs

Female applicants from the local district should be given priority during recruitment processes at municipality, irrigation projects, and other concerned bodies working in irrigation and agriculture sectors.

The perception that women don't have the capacity required for leadership needs to be changed within WUAs. This could be changed through sharing success stories of women leading similar groups.

Some female members have started realizing their self-worth and are aware why they are in the WUAs. Women farmers who aspire to hold a leadership position in a WUA should get the opportunity to develop the technical and soft skills required for the post.


Traditional and systematic barriers can be changed through awareness, social behavioral change, education and updating legal system.

Key Message

The views and needs of women, and marginalized farmers are often overlooked in male-dominated policies and programme designs-including WUAs at local level or other water related bodies at national level.

A large, light orange downward-pointing arrow connecting the first box to the second.

Until and unless women from diverse groups with diverse background hold leadership positions in these bodies in equal numbers women favored policies, programs and technologies is less likely to be made.

A large, light orange downward-pointing arrow connecting the second box to the third.

As a result, women will continue to be left beside despite their contributions 60-80 percent in food production and irrigation. This may discourage women farmers to be engaged in food production and disrupt food security.



INITIATIVE ON
NEXUS Gains