

A woman wearing a blue shirt and a colorful headscarf is working in a field of green plants. She is looking down at the plants, and her hands are visible as she works. The background is a dense field of green foliage.

ICIMOD

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Policy

APPROVED BY THE
ICIMOD BOARD OF GOVERNORS

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GESI Policy Statement

At ICIMOD, we place GESI at the centre of our work, employing a GESI-responsive approach in our work and partnerships to enable greener, more inclusive, and climate-resilient policy, action and investment. Our efforts aim to empower women and disadvantaged groups in the diverse contexts of the Hindu Kush Himalaya, and promote an organisational culture aligned with our core values.

1. Purpose

This policy provides the direction for systematic integration of GESI across all aspects of our work and the promotion of an organisational culture of respect for gender and diversity.

2. Background

Our [Strategy 2030: Moving Mountains](#) articulates ICIMOD's vision for a greener, more inclusive, and climate-resilient Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH), with gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) as a cross-cutting theme. This 2024 policy, which updates and supersedes ICIMOD's previous gender equity policy, builds upon our long-standing commitment to and experience of implementing programmes pertaining to gender issues within the changing context of the HKH (see Annex 1). It also goes further by outlining the principles, objectives, and accountabilities, which, for the first time, articulate a proactive stance toward addressing social inclusion. Social inclusion is a dynamic process which ensures that individuals and groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political, and cultural life in the society in which they live (see more in Annex 2. GESI terms and definitions).

3. Context

Gender inequality and social exclusion have been persistent challenges in the HKH, reflecting similar trends observed in other geographical locations. Women and disadvantaged groups¹ in the HKH are among those that are most exposed to climatic and environmental risks and more vulnerable to the resultant shocks. The combination of multiple factors, including inequality, exclusion, and discrimination such as that based on gender, religious and ethnic backgrounds, economic and geographical disparities, and disability, already limits these groups' access to crucial resources, opportunities, services, and participation in decision-making processes.²

People with disabilities are at particular risk during disasters and are more vulnerable during extreme

¹ ICIMOD uses the term 'disadvantaged' to encompass both 'excluded' and the 'vulnerable' (See Annex 2 for definitions)

² Wester, P., Mishra, A., Mukherji, A., & Shrestha, A. B. (Eds.). (2019). The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment: Mountains, climate change, sustainability, and people. ICIMOD.



weather events due to issues of mobility, communication barriers and limited access to assistive devices, support systems, and services which further compound their challenges. An inclusive approach acknowledges the vulnerability of people with disabilities, and recognises other intersecting inequalities that exacerbate their exclusion, such as limited access to information and services. ICIMOD is committed to adopting a step-by-step approach to disability inclusion within its programmes and initiatives.³

Gender remains a key arena for action, with new drivers such as rapid urbanisation and male outmigration reshaping traditional gender roles, increasing workloads for women within households, communities, and in agriculture,⁴ and disparities in access to health services, education, political participation, and employment remain high. The 2023 Global Gender Gap index shows that the HKH countries have much more to do to achieve gender equality⁵, and the means and methods for enhancing diversity and addressing intersectionality are not universally well understood. (See Annex 3)

Despite many commitments and declarations (see Annex 4), including national, regional (such as the HKH Call to Action), and global, and clear evidence that GESI is critical for economic and overall development and wellbeing, there is still a wide gap in implementation. Hence, ICIMOD's role as a convener, and in influencing its Regional Member Countries (RMCs) to accelerate action on GESI, remains crucial and urgent.

4. Principles

ICIMOD has articulated a set of principles that are aligned with its strategic objectives, core values, and obligations under international conventions. These principles are at the core of everything that we do. Through these principles we will strive to be:

- **Inclusive:** We will encourage and bring in diverse perspectives and promote equal voice, representation and agency of women, men, and disadvantaged groups including people with disabilities in ICIMOD's work.
- **Empowering:** We aim to empower individuals and communities by facilitating access to knowledge and skills, supporting innovation and creativity, and cultivating negotiation power, the ability to effect change, and agency in decision-making as crucial aspects of empowerment.
- **Responsive:** We will ensure that all our actions are relevant to RMC contextual realities and promote a “responsive” approach (see Box 1) to addressing gender inequality and social exclusion.

³ The focus will be on building knowledge about the status of disability in the HKH region, identifying key partnerships where disability inclusion can be integrated with Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) as a primary entry point, and on building institutional capacity on disability inclusion. Furthermore, we are committed to developing guidelines on the meaningful engagement of people with disabilities in its activities, monitoring and evaluation processes and ensuring all ICIMOD events – both physical and digital – meet universal design standards and accessibility requirements – including ramps, elevators, assistive digital technologies, and restrooms.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In the global ranking of 146 countries, the gender gap index reveals the following standings: Bangladesh ranks 59 with a score of 0.722, Bhutan ranks 103 with a score of 0.682, China ranks 107 with a score of 0.678, Nepal ranks 116 with a score of 0.659, Myanmar ranks 123 with a score of 0.650, India ranks 127 with a score of 0.643, Pakistan ranks 142 with a score of 0.575, and Afghanistan ranks 146 with a score of 0.405.



- **Ethical:** Upholding ethical standards means adhering to principles of neutrality, honesty, integrity, transparency, and accountability in all aspects of our work. This includes acting in the best interests of the communities served, respecting the rights and dignity of individuals, being culturally sensitive, and ensuring that our interventions are based on contextual assessments and circumstances.

Box 1. From GESI aware to responsive, and towards transformative by the next MTAP

- **GESI aware:** GESI issues reflected in the past were GESI aware; however, they overlooked the structural aspects of gender relations and have portrayed ‘mountain women’ as simultaneously vulnerable to climate impacts yet resilient in adaptation efforts. This has resulted in large swings from a welfare approach, in which women were considered as passive beneficiaries to one where they are seen as ‘fixers’ of environmental problems.³ This in turn has resulted in a lack of progress due to the limited focus on the structural and root causes of inequality.
- **GESI responsive:** By adopting a GESI-responsive approach, ICIMOD considers the diverse dimensions of disparities experienced by women and disadvantaged groups, which intersect with social, geographical, and other factors. This requires addressing GESI issues through specific actions that support empowerment and changing societal roles.
- **GESI transformative:** Learning from past experiences, effectively implementing transformative strategies presents challenges due to the diverse cultural, socio-economic, and political contexts of the RMCs. Therefore, adopting a GESI-responsive approach in the new policy is both pragmatic and strategic as it allows for gradual, contextually relevant interventions aligned with the prevailing priorities and realities of the RMCs. ICIMOD’s aim is to transition towards a transformative approach that addresses the root causes of inequality and exclusion specific to the HKH region, through changes in policy, practice and behaviour within the domain of its strategic programmes and internal culture.

5. Operationalising our principles

We will operationalise our GESI principles and commitments through four objectives:

1. Integrate GESI strategically across ICIMOD’s work, especially by:

- Incorporating GESI at all stages of programme design, development, implementation,

monitoring,⁶ evaluation and learning, communication, and partnership, including through collaborative definition of problems and goals.

- Generating evidence, analysing, compiling, and sharing information on regional trends, risks and opportunities in a way that influences GESI-responsive policy, action, and investment.
- Piloting and testing new methods and tools to support and monitor GESI-responsive work on policy, innovation and scaling, institutional capability, and regional collaboration.
- Initiating bold, credible, evidence-based advocacy initiatives for bringing HKH-specific GESI issues to the highest regional and global levels and using communication and media to accelerate this process.
- Incorporating GESI as a key criterion in research and publication, while ensuring adherence to ethical principles throughout the processes.

2. Inspire, encourage, and nurture ICIMOD’s partners on GESI, especially by:

- Strengthening our strategic partnerships and engagement with women, youth, and organisations/networks of disadvantaged groups, and establishing mutually beneficial collaborations to enhance knowledge production and sharing of best practices.
- Ensuring meaningful participation for diverse voices in international platforms, conventions, conferences, and dialogues.
- Leveraging our platforms to influence system-wide change including by ambitiously sharing our commitment and progress, promoting plans and joint initiatives, sharing lessons learned, and seeking out new alliances.
- Proactively providing opportunities and targeting initiatives to increase the meaningful participation and engagement of disadvantaged groups in our programmes, events, publications, and communications.

3. Strengthen ICIMOD’s and key partners’ capacity to act and deliver GESI results, especially by:

- Regularly assessing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of staff to respect and implement our GESI commitments, building their capacity through GESI training, and including GESI

⁶ To monitor and track progress on GESI, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) gender markers have been customised and adopted for tracking GESI-related indicators. The OECD tracks aid in support of gender equality and women’s rights using the OECD-DAC gender equality policy marker – a statistical tool to record aid activities that target gender equality as a policy objective. As part of the annual reporting of their aid to the OECD-DAC, DAC members are required to indicate for each project/programme whether it targets gender equality as a policy objective according to a three-point scoring system. The gender marker is based on donor intentions at the design stage. Projects/programmes marked as significant, and principal (score 1 and 2) are counted as gender equality-focused aid by the DAC. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/Minimum-recommended-criteria-for-DAC-gender-marker.pdf>



orientation during induction for all new staff.

- Raising awareness and building capacity on GESI among our key partners and stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, academics, and representatives from disadvantaged groups.

4. Enhance ICIMOD's institutional environment to deliver on our GESI commitments, especially by:

- Ensuring all institutional policies, strategies and procedures align with and incorporate our GESI commitments and building up the systems and metrics that enable monitoring, reporting, and learning on institutional progress on GESI.
- Advancing gender and diversity balance in programmes, communications, workforce, and leadership, including affirmative action to ensure recruitment diversity, retention rates, representation metrics, pay parity, transparency in hiring processes, and career mobility, and refining performance management processes and tracking mechanisms to monitor progress against these commitments.
- Establishing systems and mechanisms for preventing and addressing sexual exploitation, abuse, harassment, and other negative behaviours based on gender or social characteristics.
- Providing adequate allocations of human, technical, and financial resources to fulfil our institutional GESI commitments.

7. Accountability

Each staff member holds individual responsibility for adhering to the GESI Policy and as outlined in their Terms of Reference.

- **Board of Governors** approves and tracks adherence to GESI policy commitments through review and approval of annual plans, budgets, and reporting.
- **Director General** oversees adherence to GESI policy commitments and resource allocation and provides overall leadership on GESI including an inclusive organisational culture and safe working environment; sets the benchmark in respectful communication and behaviour.
- **Deputy Director General** ensures that GESI integration commitments are delivered across Strategic Groups and that all staff in Strategic Groups and Communications Unit adhere to our institutional GESI commitments.
- **Director of Administration, Finance Operation** aligns GESI commitments with financial, administrative, human resources, partnership, and operational policies, while also managing GESI-related institutional safeguarding risks; ensures that all administration and finance staff adhere to GESI commitments.
- **Senior Management Committee** advises on GESI approaches, policies, strategies, partnerships,

and procedures, ensuring GESI alignment and delivery across the entire institution.

- **Strategic Group Leads** oversee GESI deliverables and ensure contributions of Action Areas and Interventions to High-Level Outcomes (HLOs) and Long-term Impact Areas (LTIAs) on GESI are effective, robust and profound, and that GESI is factored and resourced into all new business development and external engagements.
- **Action Area Coordinators** ensure GESI integration in planning, resource allocation, and play a role in monitoring, reporting, and learning on GESI.
- **Intervention Managers** integrate GESI within their Intervention milestones, activities, and outputs and ensure quality delivery, monitoring of progress, and evidence-based reporting on GESI.
- **Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Lead** offers strategic guidance on all elements of GESI policy objectives, and acts as quality assurer on all GESI matters, whilst also tracking adherence to GESI commitments across ICIMOD, including ensuring all institutional policies, strategies, and procedures capture GESI. Additionally, the GESI Lead offers technical expertise and guidance and supports internalisation of the new GESI approach among ICIMOD staff and leadership.

8. Implementation

Following approval, ICIMOD will develop an implementation plan for this policy, including key expected policy outcomes, planned actions and outputs that contribute to these, and specific responsibilities. Annual progress reports will provide updates on progress against the policy implementation plan.

Annex 1. ICIMOD's past and current commitments on GESI

ICIMOD has been promoting gender equity in mountain development since 1995 through various initiatives, including raising awareness, conducting training sessions, supporting networking of mountain women, organising global gatherings on gender and mountains, and producing knowledge on gender issues. Efforts have been made throughout to integrate gender issues into ICIMOD's programmes, strategies, Medium-Term Action Plans (MTAPs), and institutional policies.

ICIMOD first issued its gender policy in 2007 with subsequent revisions in 2013 and 2020.

Recent developments that this GESI policy responds to include: The **Strategy 2030: Moving Mountains** which emphasises the central role of GESI, with 'inclusion' in the overarching vision of *"a greener, more inclusive and climate-resilient Hindu Kush Himalaya."* We have also committed to *"integrate and track progress on gender equity and social inclusion and promote youth leadership as addressing the concerns of women and youth are fundamental to progress"* (p 7). Inclusiveness is also a core value: *"We demonstrate the value of diversity and equality through our operations. We bring various perspectives into our evidence building, decision-making and production. We ensure representation and seek opportunities for diverse voices to be heard."*

The **Medium-Term Action Plan V (2023-26): Embracing Change and Accelerating Action** committed ICIMOD to advancing GESI as a key cross-cutting issue: *"The vital cross-cutting issues of GESI, climate and biodiversity are incorporated into the delivery of our results and...will be supported by a dedicated resource for insights and innovation."*

More specific MTAP V commitments on GESI include:

- The inclusion of specific GESI markers in the Results and MEL Frameworks
- Guidelines for internal quality review, both ex-ante and for publications
- Ethics policy and guidelines, including on how to manage safeguarding
- Partnership approach, particularly in new partnerships
- BDRM and project and knowledge management processes

ICIMOD's Human resource Policy 2020 commits to attracting and retaining women and other disadvantaged groups, promoting youth leadership, mandating GESI-related capacity building and creating a respectful work environment, and ensuring gender equity and parity in all aspects of HR.

ICIMOD developed a comprehensive **Policy on Prevention and Redressal of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (2020)** which is complemented by Procedures for Handling Sexual Harassment within ICIMOD.

ICIMOD is now in the process of developing a comprehensive **Safeguarding Policy**, along with separate policies for Child Protection and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA). Risk assessment and management for PSEA and child safeguarding will be integrated into organisational, programmatic,



and activity-based risk assessment processes, with mitigation plans for any identified risks. ICIMOD will update its grievance reporting mechanism and all formally lodged grievances will be reported to the Board of Governors.

The **Quinquennial Review (2021)** report emphasised the need for ICIMOD to take a more proactive role in ensuring not only gender equality but also social inclusion in its work. While acknowledging that “*social inclusion is a complex, challenging and often politically sensitive issue in the HKH region*” it nevertheless emphasized the importance for ICIMOD to understand the critical social inclusion and exclusion issues that mountain communities face across the eight RMCs as they intersect with ICIMOD’s core areas and themes of work.

The **GESI Audit (2020)** recommended that “*a more systematic integration of gender and social inclusion is needed at strategic, institutional, and programmatic level*”.



Annex 2. GESI terms and definitions⁷

Gender equality is the measurable equal representation of women and men. Gender equality does not imply that women and men are the same, but that they have equal value and should be accorded equal treatment, opportunities, and benefits. Thus, it emphasises women and men enjoying the same status on political, social, economic, and cultural levels and having equal rights, opportunities, and status.

Social inclusion is a dynamic process which ensures that individuals and groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political, and cultural life in the society in which they live. Achieving social inclusion requires dismantling institutional barriers, enhancing incentives, changing policies, rules, and social practices, and shifting perspectives and behaviours towards marginalised groups.

Intersectionality: Analytical lens that defines the extent of inequality, exclusion, and vulnerability (or power and advantage) that people or groups of persons hold or experience by looking at how their different identities intersect or overlap.

Gender equity: The process of being fair to women and men, girls and boys, and importantly the equality of outcomes and results. Gender equity may involve the use of temporary special measures to compensate for historical or systemic bias or discrimination. It refers to differential treatment that is fair and positively addresses a bias or disadvantage that is due to gender roles or norms or differences between the sexes. Equity ensures that women and men and girls and boys have an equal chance, not only at the starting point, but also when reaching the finishing line. It is about the fair and just treatment of both sexes that considers the different needs of men and women, cultural barriers, and (past) discrimination of the specific group.

Gender mainstreaming / integrating: A strategy to accelerate progress on women's and girls' rights and equality in relation to men and boys. This is the chosen approach of the United Nations system and international community toward implementation of women's and girls' rights, as a sub-set of human rights to which the United Nations dedicates itself. Gender equality is the goal. Gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for girls and boys and men and women of any planned action, including legislation, policies, and programmes. It is a strategy for making girls' and women's, as well as boy's and men's, concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes so that girls, boys, women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated.

⁷ Adapted from ICIMOD Gender Equity policy 2020; UNICEF Glossary of Terms and Concepts 2017; and Framework for Integrating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in the Asian Development Bank's South Asia Operations, 2023.

Empowerment is both the process and outcome of individuals taking charge of their lives: defining their own goals, acquiring skills (or having their existing skills and knowledge acknowledged), enhancing self-assurance, problem-solving, and fostering self-reliance. It includes building capacity to make deliberate life choices and facilitates the transformation of gender norms that underpin existing unequal relations and practices.

Excluded groups are those who historically have been unable to fully access and/or benefit from social, economic, and political rights, opportunities, and resources because of their identities, e.g., gender, disabilities, social identities (e.g., caste, ethnicity, and religion), sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics, geographic location, and income status. They experience systemic disadvantage.

Vulnerable groups are those who cannot access various rights, opportunities, and resources because of their situational disadvantage. People are 'vulnerable' when deprivations result from a particular situation that reduces their ability to withstand shocks and access various rights, opportunities, and resources. In a person's life cycle, vulnerability is most experienced in old age and young age, especially by older people (65 and above) and disadvantaged youth. Vulnerability can also be because of climate change or disasters or migrant status. They experience situational disadvantage.

Disadvantaged groups are those who historically have been unable to fully access and/or benefit from social, economic, and political rights, opportunities, and resources because of their identities (systemic disadvantage) and/or because of their vulnerability (situational disadvantage).



Annex 3. Gender Data for the regional member countries

Global Gender Gap Report 2023

Country	Global Gender Gap Score	Economic Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health and Survival	Political Empowerment
Bangladesh	0.722	0.438	0.936	0.962	0.552
Bhutan	0.682	0.708	0.963	0.962	0.093
China	0.678	0.727	0.935	0.937	0.114
Nepal	0.659	0.476	0.918	0.969	0.276
Myanmar	0.650	0.600	0.977	0.975	0.047
India	0.643	0.367	1	0.950	0.253
Pakistan	0.575	0.362	0.825	0.961	0.152
Afghanistan	0.405	0.188	0.482	0.952	0.000

Source: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/>

A parity score of 1 signifies complete parity, indicating no gender disparity. The gender gap is quantified as the difference between the achieved parity score and full parity, providing insight into the extent of gender inequality within the given context.

Human Development Index (HDI), Gender Development Index (GDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII)

Country	HDI (2022)	GDI (2022)	GII (2022)
Afghanistan	0.462	0.622	0.665
Bangladesh	0.670	0.914	0.498
Bhutan	0.681	0.970	0.334
China	0.788	0.962	0.186
India	0.644	0.852	0.437
Myanmar	0.608	0.941	0.479
Nepal	0.601	0.885	0.495

Pakistan	0.540	0.834	0.522
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Source: Human Development Report 2023-24,
<https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2023-24>

Human Development Index (HDI): A composite index measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development – a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. The higher HDI score, the better the country is doing in terms of these key dimensions.

Gender Development Index (GDI): Ratio of female to male HDI values based on the three basic dimensions of human development: health, measured by female and male life expectancy at birth; education, measured by female and male expected years of schooling for children and female and male mean years of schooling for adults aged 25 years and older; and command over economic resources, measured by female and male estimated earned income. A GDI value of 1 signifies equality between genders, while values deviating from 1 indicate varying degrees of inequality.

Gender Inequality Index (GII): A composite measure reflecting inequality in achievement between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and the labour market. A low GII value indicates low inequality between women and men, and a high value indicates high inequality.



Annex 4: International and Regional Commitments to GESI

ICIMOD's GESI-responsive approaches and pledges are in line with a number of regional and international commitments to GESI. These include:

- The [HKH Call to Action](#) (2020), which contains multiple GESI-related commitments. Action 2 states “Recognise and prioritise the uniqueness of the HKH mountain people in national, regional, and global decision-making institutions and processes”, Action 4 states “Take accelerated action to achieve the SDGs in the HKH based on the nine mountain priorities, focusing on transformative adaptation, tackling poverty and inequality, inclusive development and leaving no one behind”.
- Based on the HIMAP assessment of [Nine Mountain Priorities](#), Mountain Priority 3 states “Achieve gender and social equity through inclusive and transformative change in the mountains” alongside a series of targets. This is consistent with a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a focus on [Gender Equality](#) (SDG 5), [Reduced Inequalities](#) (SDG 10) and [Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions](#) (SDG 16).
- Other relevant SDGs address gender issues within [Climate Action](#) (SDG 13, especially target 13.6), with relevance to our agenda also in [Sustainable Cities and Communities](#) (SDG 11), [Responsible Consumption and Production](#) (SDG 12) and [Life on Land](#) (SDG 15).
- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Gender Action Plan highlights the importance of gender mainstreaming in climate change initiatives, empowering women, and vulnerable groups.
- The 2015 Paris Agreement, the UNFCCC’s international treaty on climate change, emphasises human rights, gender equality, and the rights of vulnerable groups.
- The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) advocates for integrating gender considerations into biodiversity conservation and promoting indigenous knowledge.
- The Committee on Gender and Climate Change of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) raised concerns about the lack of a gender perspective in global frameworks, leading to General Recommendation No. 37 on Gender-related Dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction.
- The 66th UN Commission on the Status of Women prioritised climate change, leading to the establishment of an Action Coalition on Feminist Action for Climate Justice.
- The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) emphasises the inclusion of persons with disabilities and reducing accessibility barriers. The Incheon Strategy (2013) provides the first set of regionally agreed disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and management priorities, comprising 10 goals, 27 targets, and 62 indicators.
- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) safeguards the

rights of Indigenous peoples.

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, declared that human rights applied to all individuals, with Article 2 noting that “everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (UDHR 1948). Building on the UDHR, there have been a series of important international instruments specifically focused on promoting a range of women’s rights across political, social, economic, and cultural fields.
- The United Nations International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions cover a wide area of social and labour issues including basic human rights, minimum wages, industrial relations, employment policy, social dialogue, social security, and other issues.

