

GENDER & SOCIAL INCLUSION STRATEGY

March 2026

"Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development."

- Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992

The Rainforest Foundation US (RFUS) Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy seeks to mainstream¹ gender and social inclusion across all RFUS programs, based on a strong and consistent intercultural approach.

To be effective and enduring, rainforest protection—at the grassroots level—takes the whole of a community. Men, women, elders, youth, among other demographic categories, each have distinct knowledge of the ecosystem to contribute to the effort. Meanwhile the impacts of rainforest loss and climate change more broadly are not gender-neutral, and it is often women, girls, and disadvantaged populations who are most vulnerable to natural disasters. For action to result in long term, sustainable management and protection of collective territories, it must be based in the respect for rights, participation, and a broad mandate from all members of a community.

gen-der (noun) The social construction of people's identities that depend on time, place and culture. The concept of gender has evolved over time and through social movements, and today, people's gender can be as diverse and fluid as they choose.

The RFUS GESI Strategy aims to achieve such outcomes. Grounded in international human rights principles and full respect for Indigenous peoples' rights to determine their own forms of organization, participation, and development², the strategy offers an intercultural approach, based on dialogue and co-creation, to ensure that social inclusion and gender equity are built from and with communities themselves. Success of the strategy will be seen in the increasing quality and breadth of contributions leveraged from within partner communities and organizations to bring about positive rainforest protection outcomes.

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1. **Gender perspective or mainstreaming** is a process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including policies, processes, or programs, in any field and at all levels of implementation. Its goal is to ensure that the concerns and strategies of women and men are integral to the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic, and social spheres, so that women and men can benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.
 2. See Annex A for a full list of international frameworks concerned with recognizing and respecting gender and social inclusion as relevant to the operating space in which RFUS works.

The GESI Strategy was developed through a process that included the retention of a specialist with extensive experience in developing and implementing gender strategies in Latin America, a desk review of relevant documentation on the topics of gender and environment, as well as interviews with key internal and external stakeholders totaling 19 individuals and organizations. The process was steered by an RFUS Gender Working Group composed of staff representing all of our geographical programs.

I. Context and rationale

Indigenous peoples and local communities are key actors in the work to protect and defend their rainforests and territories. At RFUS, we have seen firsthand that women and men within these communities possess distinct relationships with nature and therefore hold unique responsibilities that must be honored and considered equally to ensure the forests around them are safeguarded and stewarded for future generations.

However, members within these groups may experience unequal rights, decision-making power, and impacts from external pressures. Communities are also continuously evolving in how gender roles are understood and negotiated. Women within many communities are increasingly taking on leadership roles, and seeking to generate conditions of equality in all aspects of their lives: family, social, economic and individual. The success of any rainforest protection and climate work therefore cannot be separated from issues of gender and social inclusion.

Rainforest Foundation US has historically partnered with Indigenous peoples to protect their rights and rainforests across the Amazon and Central America. We work with organizations, federations, and alliances from the grassroots to global levels. Within these groups, women, men, and people of other genders have developed distinct identities and intersectionalities³ that have long been subject to structural inequalities, especially for women, children, youth, the elderly, and the LGBTIQ+ community.

In preparation for this strategy, some structural inequalities in our operating geographies were identified by staff and partners as:

- Inequalities in land tenure and inheritance rights;
- Differentiated risks of violence for women and girls as a result of territorial insecurity;
- Unequal representation in land governance spaces, institutions, and in leadership roles;
- Strong community gender roles limiting opportunities for capacity building and engagement in technical and political spaces;
- Institutional cultures that fail to fully recognize and protect the roles of women in achieving their organizational mandate.

The GESI Strategy seeks to address such structural inequalities to ensure our partnerships are designed with existing gaps in mind to promote balanced contributions from all members of the community.

3. **Intersectionality** refers to the recognition that individuals and groups may possess overlapping social and political identities, each of which may be subject to distinct forms of oppression and discrimination.

“The gender-environment nexus can be understood by recognizing, on the one hand, the extent to which slow progress on environmental goals affects the condition of women and men differently and hampers gender equality; and on the other, how gender equality and women’s empowerment can deliver positive impacts on the environmental aspects.”

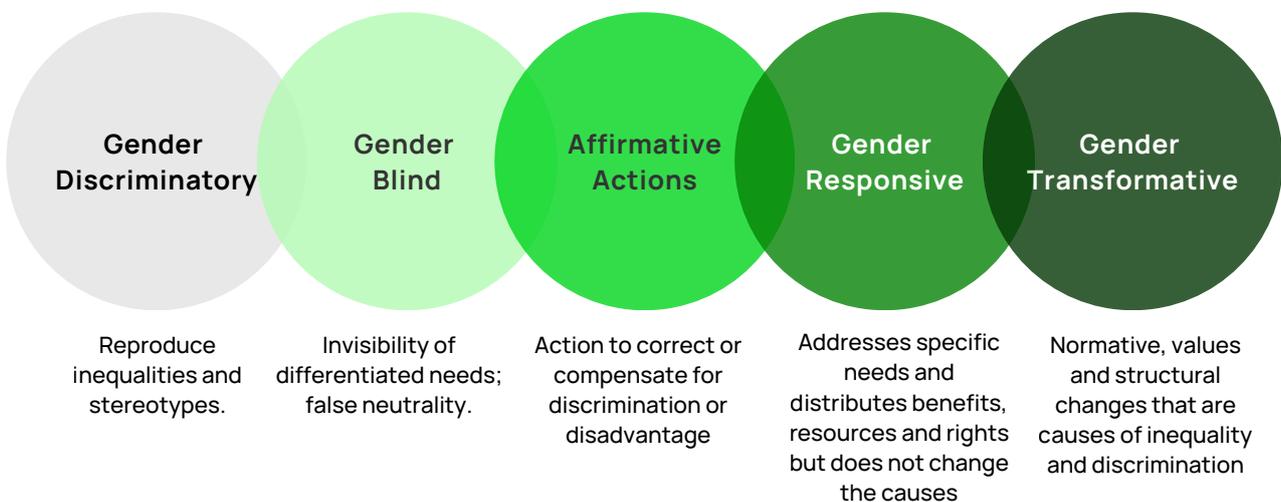
- OECD Gender and the Environment Report, 2021, p. 19

II. Scope of the strategy

For equality and inclusion to truly take root, they must begin with how we work. RFUS has an institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policy; Policy on Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment Policy (PSEAH); Anti-Human Trafficking Policy; Equal Employment Opportunity - Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation Prevention Policy; as well as an organizational Gender Policy; all of them compiled in our Employee Handbook, and some of which can be found on the RFUS website. Among other actions, RFUS undertakes periodic reviews of its policies. In addition, RFUS incorporates its PSEAH Policy into all sub-grant agreements and consultant contracts, offering partners support to review or develop their own policies to ensure equivalent fundamental protections are shared priorities. The policy also provides for continuous training for the RFUS program team on these issues, among others.

Building off RFUS’s organizational commitment to gender equality, this GESI Strategy encompasses the substantive programmatic work of RFUS as it pertains to projects and activities implemented with partners on the ground according to RFUS’ three strategic priorities in our 2025-2030 Strategy, which include 1) land rights, 2) territorial protection and 3) institutional strengthening.

The types of gender actions that will serve as a guide for the design of partner interventions are based on a gender integration continuum:



RFUS aims to ensure our programs are designed to consider existing gaps and structural inequalities preventing the full contribution of all demographics within our partnerships in order to achieve effective and durable outcomes for rainforest protection and defense. To this end, the GESI strategy will strive to produce gender-transformative, gender-responsive, and affirmative strategies, catered and proportionate to the context, partner priorities, program goals, and type of activities to be implemented. The level of gender integration may vary at the community level, where actions may be more responsive or affirmative—respecting local norms—while at the organizational level, efforts may be more transformative, where partners have greater influence over leadership, policies, and resource allocation. RFUS will support partners in avoiding gender-blind or gender-negative actions, such as reinforcing stereotypes about women’s roles. A combination of approaches may be used within the same program, provided they contribute to broader, self-determined equity and inclusion goals.

While RFUS works primarily with indigenous communities, within the scope of the GESI Strategy, the focus will be on people who – within the same Indigenous, local and/or Afro-Descendant communities – face a situation of disadvantage, vulnerability and/or exclusion, such as women, youth⁴, elderly people, people with disabilities, and the LGBTIQ+ community. The identification of priority populations may be carried out through an initial GESI assessment, in a co-designed and partner-led process. Intersectional factors will be analyzed based on the specific context of the individuals and communities.

III. General principles

Gender mainstreaming and social inclusion in RFUS programs will comply with the following principles:

- Do no harm
- Gender work is co-created, consent-based, and partner-led
- Flexibility and adaptability depending on the context
- Do not reinforce gender stereotypes
- Work with families
- Integrate men and boys
- Do not impose
- Do not discriminate

IV. Objectives and actions

The overall objective of the RFUS GESI Strategy is to support partners in identifying and addressing gender and social inclusion gaps through co-created and partner-led processes. RFUS recognizes that gender initiatives must reflect the aspirations, values, and social structures of each community and organization.

4. The definition of "youth" may vary depending on the country or community context and should be approached with cultural sensitivity.

Integrating GESI as a cross-cutting priority across RFUS programming and partnerships requires a comprehensive, phased approach that includes the following actions:

1. Raise awareness and build understanding of gender and social inclusion for programmatic integration.
2. Co-design participatory processes with partners to identify and develop strategies to address specific challenges, gaps, and opportunities in each context.
3. Design consent-based partner-led activities emphasizing gender sensitive and socially inclusive practices.
4. Develop participatory monitoring and evaluation frameworks that incorporate GESI indicators from the outset to measure progress and inform existing strategies.

The incorporation of a gender and social inclusion perspective in joint work is a collaborative and evolving process that follows flexible, adaptable, and 'learning-by-doing' principles. Continuous dialogue with partners will be essential to ensure that actions are relevant, culturally appropriate, and sustainable. In some cases, communities or partners may express hesitation or resistance to certain gender-related concepts or approaches. Rather than viewing this as a barrier, RFUS sees it as an opportunity to deepen dialogue, build trust, and co-create strategies that are meaningful, inclusive, and rooted in local realities.

RFUS is committed to supporting local organizations' work alongside women, families, and communities in their efforts to advance stronger gender sensitive and socially inclusive outcomes. The following are some of the actions we could anticipate implementing in close collaboration with partners, among others relevant to their context:

Collective and individual rights

- Increased awareness among women and their communities of their collective and individual land rights and forest protection.
- Strengthened ability to negotiate, organize, and participate in land-related processes, including in mixed-gender and intercultural spaces.

Leadership

- Greater participation of women in land governance structures and decision-making bodies related to territory, as well as in territorial monitoring activities that input into governance strategies.
- Recognition by community and organizational leaders of the role women play in land defense, management, and governance.
- Strengthening of the capacity of women to speak publicly and advocate for their rights to equitable access and control of territories and natural resources in community, institutional, and public spaces.

Safeguard mechanisms

- Support local organizations to implement safeguard mechanisms related to security and violence that prevent women from engaging in land defense and monitoring efforts.

Strengthening organizations

- Strengthening women's leadership in organizations and decision-making processes
- Strengthen the capacities of women and youth in financial management and oversight and implementation of activities, considering technological and educational gaps.

V. Strategy implementation roadmap



Phase 1: Strengthening RFUS Internal Capacity

Create the necessary institutional conditions for the GESI approach to be embraced as an integral part of RFUS's purpose, vision, and programming.



Phase 2: Strengthen Capacity, Planning, and Participatory Diagnosis with Partners

Raise awareness with partners and assess the main gender inequalities and forms of social exclusion as a basis for contextualized planning.



Phase 3: Implementation of GESI Actions

Define a prioritized and time-bound Action Plan, based on the participatory assessment and priorities of partners, and commence implementation of actions outlined therein.



Phase 4: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

Measure progress, identify lessons learned, adjust strategies, and make the impacts of implementation visible in a systematic and participatory way.



Phase 5: Institutionalization and Scaling

Consolidate the GESI approach as a structural component of RFUS and partner programming, facilitating continuity of gender awareness and action beyond specific projects.

Mainstreaming the GESI strategy within RFUS programming is not a linear process, but rather a dynamic, progressive, and deeply contextual one. For this reason, we foresee a phased implementation that adapts to RFUS's institutional capacities, the priorities and capacities of partners, and the sociocultural realities on the ground. Throughout the entire process, the active involvement of local partners and allied organizations will be ensured, understanding that the construction of gender and social equity and inclusion must be collective.

RFUS will seek to first build its own capacity, to then incorporate GESI strategies within both its ongoing programming and new programs, always respecting partner priorities, capacities, and cultures. GESI strategies constructed with partners will enhance work within the three priorities of RFUS's 2025-2030 Strategy, which are advancing land rights; territorial protection; and institutional strengthening. The following are the main steps towards implementation of the strategy, to be adapted according to resources available.

Phase 1: Strengthening RFUS Internal Capacity

Objective: Create the necessary institutional conditions for the GESI approach to be embraced as an integral part of RFUS's purpose, vision, and programming.

This phase includes actions such as:

- Training workshops with all RFUS staff on the GESI Strategy and its practical implications.
- Internal dissemination of materials on key concepts, levels of GESI integration, and normative frameworks.
- Review and adaptation of relevant strategic documents, indicators, and data collection methods.
- Establishment of a GESI focal point or focal points within each program.

Participation of key actors: Although this phase is internally focused, we will aim to involve representatives from partners or allied networks in selected training and feedback sessions to strengthen coherence between institutional discourse and territorial realities.

Phase 2: Strengthen Capacity, Planning, and Participatory Diagnosis with Partners

Objective: Raise awareness with partners and assess the main gender inequalities and forms of social exclusion as a basis for contextualized planning.

In this phase, workshops, clear and accessible materials, and participatory tools such as an initial GESI assessment may be developed and implemented collaboratively with:

- Community leaders (including women, youth, and traditional authorities)
- Demographic groups within communities in situations of vulnerability (women, youth, persons with disabilities, among others)
- Partner organizations and federations
- Relevant allied technical organizations

Workshops will identify priority populations, diagnose challenges, and strategize solutions to address gaps. This diagnosis will be the foundation to co-design GESI strategies and actions, prioritizing affirmative, responsive, or transformative approaches depending on the context. This work may also inform partners' operational frameworks to strengthen accountability for the delivery of GESI related activities.

Participation of key actors: In this phase, the participation of relevant community members and leaders is central. RFUS may act as a technical facilitator, but the analysis, validation, and prioritization of actions will be led by partners.

Phase 3: Implementation of GESI Actions

Objective: Define a prioritized and time-bound Action Plan, based on the participatory assessment and priorities of partners, and commence implementation of actions outlined therein.

This phase will produce an Action Plan, translating GESI strategies into concrete goals and activities as a time-bound work plan, and see it through to initial implementation. Resources, staffing, and a monitoring framework may need to be established to ensure the plan's success. This phase may necessitate fundraising support as well as technical accompaniment to ensure activities are implemented in accordance with the considerations flagged in the initial assessment.

Participation of key actors: All activities will be implemented by partner organizations, community leaders, and/or local federations. RFUS will support community leadership by providing technical assistance and resources while avoiding imposing external solutions. Additionally, the involvement of men, boys, traditional authorities, and other influential actors will be encouraged to foster sustainable and not merely compensatory change.

Phase 4: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

Objective: Measure progress, identify lessons learned, adjust strategies, and make the impacts of implementation visible in a systematic and participatory way.

This phase will leverage both qualitative and quantitative tools to integrate and evaluate GESI indicators defined in the Action Plan. Monitoring will include the collection of testimonies, success stories, and community feedback to inform the initiative's performance.

Participation of key actors: Collective learning spaces will be promoted with partners and networks. This will include assemblies, reflection workshops, community interviews, and self-assessment mechanisms to strengthen horizontal accountability.

Phase 5: Institutionalization and Scaling

Objective: Consolidate the GESI approach as a structural component of RFUS and partner programming, facilitating continuity of gender awareness and action beyond specific projects.

This final phase prioritizes actions such as:

- Periodic review of the Action Plan and updating of the strategy based on lessons learned.
- Consolidate resources and support for integration of the GESI approach across programming.
- Strengthening networks of collaboration with social and climate justice, feminist, human rights, and youth organizations.
- Systematization and dissemination of good practices for replication and adaptation in other regions.

Participation of key actors: Strategic partners and communities must be actively involved in evaluating and redesigning the GESI approach. Their visibility as local and regional leaders will also be promoted in events, publications, and learning platforms.



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ANNEX A

Rule of Law Framework

The international legal framework has made significant progress in making visible and addressing the relationship between climate change and gender/social inclusion. Although each country in which RFUS works has its national regulatory framework, the international framework contains the general elements that guide it.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW

General Recommendation 37 relates aspects of disaster risk reduction to the context of climate change and calls on States to advance gender mainstreaming into all areas and elements of climate action (IDLO, 2022, p. 8)

Paris Agreement

“Recognizing the need for gender equality and the empowerment of women in addressing climate change; and the Glasgow Climate Pact, calling States to increase the full, meaningful and equal participation of women in climate action” (IDLO, 2022, p. 8)

Lima Work Program on Gender for the UNFCCC

Promote the effective participation of women.
Strengthening women's empowerment.
Implementation of gender-sensitive climate policies.
Establishes the Gender Action Plan (GAP)

Agenda 2030

Contains the general framework linking gender, rule of law and climate change, as expressed in Sustainable Development Goals: 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment); 13 (climate action) and 16 (peaceful, just and inclusive societies) (IDLO, 2022, p. 8)

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

Points out “Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment” as one of the 12 critical areas of concern in which governments, the international community, civil society, and the private sector (IDLO, 2022, p.8)

Paris Agreement

Parties acknowledge that adaptation action should follow a country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory taking into consideration vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems. Should be based on and guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of Indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems.



World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia

Related Intolerance “Recognize that racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance occur on the grounds of race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin and that victims can suffer multiple or aggravated forms of discrimination based on other related grounds such as sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, social origin, property, birth or other status” (General issues, 2).

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

“It provides international standards for the respect and guarantee of the rights of indigenous peoples and establishes “Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and Resources (Article 29)

Escazú Agreement

Guarantee the full and effective Agreement implementation in Latin America and the Caribbean of the rights to access to environmental information, public participation in environmental decision-making processes, and access to justice in environmental matters, as well as the creation and strengthening of capacities and cooperation, contributing to the protection of each person's rights.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

“Emphasizing the importance of women’s participation in effectively managing disaster risks, and gender-disaggregated data” (IDLO, 2022, p. 8)

Kyoto Protocol

Promotion of energy efficiency, protection and enhancement of sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases. Promotion of sustainable forest management practices, afforestation and reforestation, all of which point towards the environmental dimension of climate change” (Oluborode, 2016, p.34)

World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Johannesburg

Establish measures for protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development (Section IV).