

Advancing towards gender mainstreaming in water resources management: Taking action

This brief identifies seven enablers for gender mainstreaming and recommendations for countries that are at different stages in the process.

Gender mainstreaming in water resources management (WRM) is not new, but implementation is slow. Why? How can countries accelerate progress?

There is growing awareness of the urgency to include all parts of the community in WRM: inclusion reduces inequalities in access and improves the sustainability of water systems.

Gender and inclusion policies in WRM have been developed around the world, yet there is still a gap between policy and practice. Policies are not always accompanied by concrete action plans, nor are they adequately funded. As a result implementation may be insufficient, and monitoring and evaluation may not be sophisticated enough to reveal the true gender and inclusion dynamics within a given WRM context.

What does gender mainstreaming in WRM mean?

Gender mainstreaming goes beyond the issue of equality between men and women. We must also consider the intersectionality between gender and other issues when designing gender mainstreaming strategies for WRM, such as ethnicity, migrant status, sexual orientation, age, and disability. Gender mainstreaming is usually interpreted to mean one of the following:

All gender groups and individuals are **represented fairly** in water resources management executive and decision-making bodies.

There is equal opportunity to raise voices and participate in the decision-making process on water resources at all levels.

All gender perspectives are fully integrated in water planning, management, and decision-making.



“The number of women representatives in water projects and boards should not be the sole goal, neither the ultimate objective of gender mainstreaming. This alone doesn’t guarantee that gender issues are mainstreamed; it is a much wider process.”

The presence of women won’t radically influence the impact of a project if the women have not been included in the design phase and if all gender needs have not been integrated with defined gender-sensitive objectives.”

**Dibya Kansakar, former employee of the
Department of Water Resources
and Irrigation, Nepal**

Key enablers

Many countries have taken significant steps towards advancing gender mainstreaming in WRM. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy, but the report identifies **seven enablers for gender mainstreaming**.

1. There is strong commitment to gender mainstreaming among the executive leadership at the national level



High-level political commitment to gender mainstreaming across sectors raises awareness and encourages commitment and action at all levels. Independent bodies reporting directly to

the executive and legislative branches of power, along with accountability mechanisms, can help to ensure that political discourse is turned into tangible action.

2. Egalitarian legal frameworks and gender are explicitly integrated into water laws, policies, and strategies



An egalitarian constitution is an important foundation for gender mainstreaming, along with gender mainstreaming tools and strategies that are integrated into legal and

policy frameworks for WRM. However, this is usually not enough to bring about systemic change. Gender equality in policy-making is not only about recognising that men and women have the same rights, but also about identifying and implementing specific strategies to address the barriers to access those rights.

3. Earmarked funding is allocated to gender mainstreaming in WRM



Gender mainstreaming units need to be set up within ministries and at the local level, with recruitment of gender specialists to implement gender-focused activities. These units should

have a clear mandate to review the agenda and activities of the ministries or agencies they represent. Specific funds for gender equality measures are mainly present in programmes addressing social inclusion or fundamental human rights, but should also be adopted in policy fields that are not perceived as being directly related to gender equality, such as WRM.

“It all starts from the political will to implement gender mainstreaming ... Without this it would be difficult to drive the gender mainstreaming process.”

Patrick Mlilo, South African Department of Water and Sanitation, Director of National Water Resource Planning

4. Supportive frameworks are established for the effective participation and parity of women in the development and implementation of policies, programmes, and projects



There are both direct and indirect barriers to women's effective participation in WRM: we need to promote changes that engage women and other vulnerable groups across the water value chain, rather than simply viewing them as end users. Quotas are a good starting point, but the conditions must exist for women to have sufficient input and influence.

5. Centralised monitoring systems are overseen by a national body



A national body such as a statistics office may have the means and technical skills to design gender-responsive indicators and gender-disaggregated data collection. This is crucial to developing action plans that promote women's and men's access to decision making and control over resources. More precise measurements of the participation of women and other vulnerable groups in WRM could be further developed.

“The lack of accurate and reliable gender-specific data, which would indicate the existence of problems, is a main challenge in gender mainstreaming in WRM.”

Ahmed Mohamed Hassan, Hydrometeorology Department, Ministry of Energy and Water Resources, Somalia

6. Investments are made in education, awareness raising, and capacity development



Prevailing norms about a woman's place in society can be countered by investments in education, awareness raising and training, which can also increase the opportunities for women to enter policy- and decision-making spaces in WRM.

“Legislation, policy, organisational aspects is one enabler of gender mainstreaming, but one more key enabling factor is education: providing education, giving opportunities to women and girls to go into the field of water management.”

Kirsty Bunfield, National Water Policy Branch, Water Division, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Focal Point for SDG 6.5.1, Australia

7. Multi-stakeholder and intersectoral coordination mechanisms and bodies are in place



Some countries have adopted multi-sectoral commissions, in which members of the central government, the local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and user associations are represented. Such mechanisms and bodies can engage with stakeholders, raise awareness and support capacity development, while setting goals and monitoring progress on gender equality.

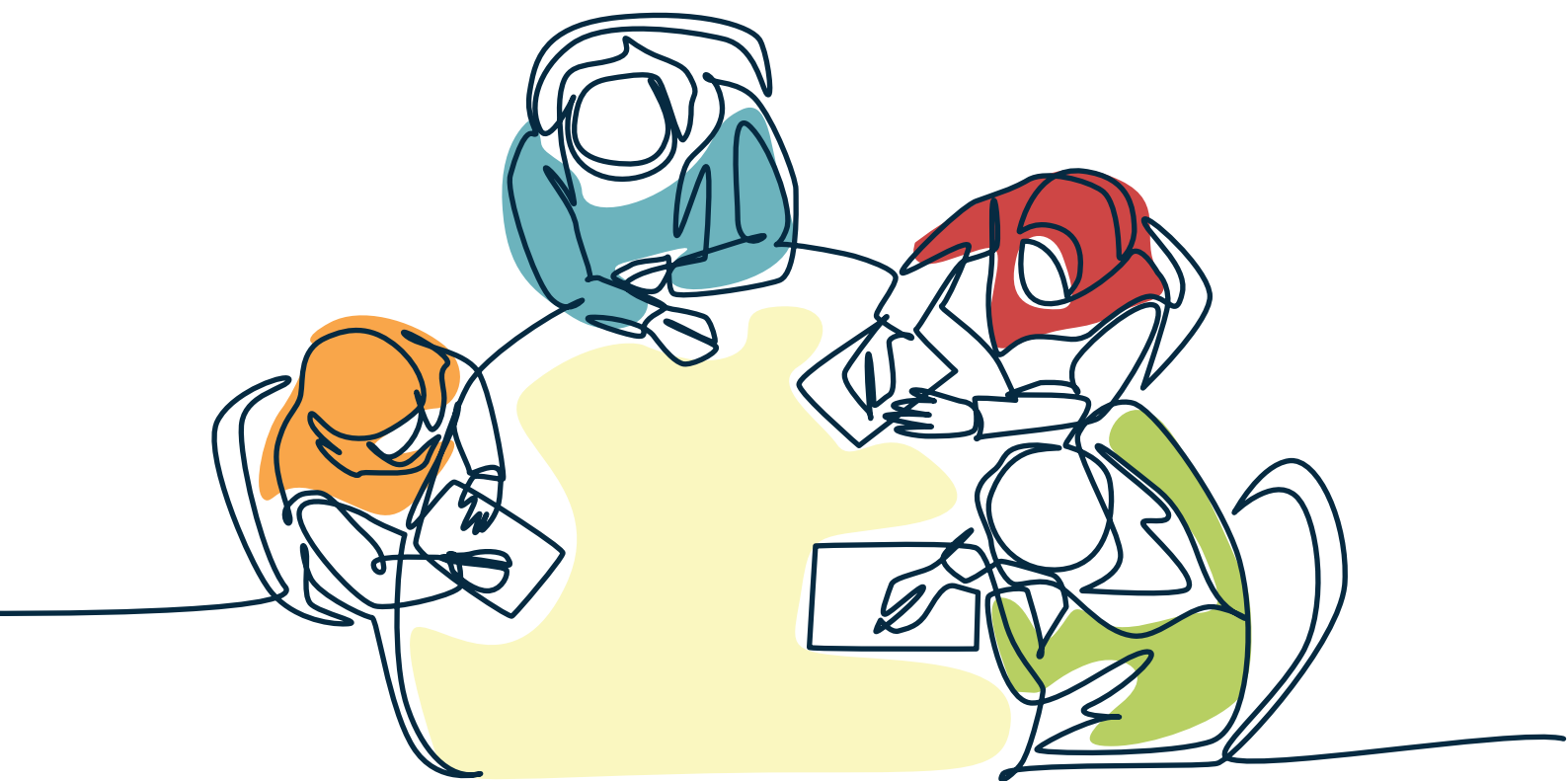
Recommendations – what countries can do

For **countries with no or low implementation** of gender mainstreaming, a preliminary **gender analysis** to understand barriers, gaps, and opportunities is essential to help lay the foundation for a gender mainstreaming strategy for WRM. Capacity for this exercise may be developed in collaboration with gender experts and local partnerships with community-based initiatives. There is a strong case for **collaboration with the health and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sectors**. Ministries can work together to improve the well-being of all citizens while meeting the water and sanitation needs of **vulnerable and minority groups**. These groups could be **empowered** to take on new roles, beyond that of ‘water custodians’, and participate in national development agendas.

Countries with a medium level of implementation may be struggling to put a previously developed gender mainstreaming strategy into action. **Gender units** could be created within all ministries, including for water and/or environment, staffed with engineers as well as gender experts. These units would take the lead in conducting gender evaluations and gender impact assessments using gender-disaggregated data collected annually.

Countries with a high level of gender mainstreaming, which might have achieved several objectives in their gender mainstreaming strategies related to WRM, should acknowledge that disparities persist in every context. They should **continue to implement and document, through disaggregated data, policies that address the asymmetrical relationships** in their society. Although representation matters, and it is important to have women in post at the top within WRM, this does not replace the need to design and implement evidence-based gender mainstreaming strategies to identify discriminatory practices, increase the number of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and related fields, and develop gender budgeting and procurement strategies.





Given the complexity of countries' political, social and economic systems, we deliberately avoid recommending any particular practice across the board, since there is definitely no one-size-fits-all solution. However, we believe that the key enablers may be common to all countries, and many of the examples from one country, contained in the main report, may be applicable to others.

At the Global Water Partnership (GWP), it is our belief that fully achieving IWRM will not be possible without mainstreaming of gender in water resources management, and vice versa. The monitoring of Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and Sustainable Development Goal 6 on clean water and sanitation has shown that it is a long journey to fully achieving both objectives. To this end, the SDG 6 IWRM Support Programme and its member organisations are committed to supporting nation states with tools and sharing of experience.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief draws on the report *Advancing towards gender mainstreaming in water resources management*, published by the SDG 6 IWRM Support Programme in 2021. The brief is based on country responses to gender-related questions in the survey instrument for SDG indicator 6.5.1 and additional interviews with 23 countries that are at different stages in the process. The SDG 6 IWRM Support Programme is a coordination mechanism under the guidance of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), as the custodian agency for SDG indicator 6.5.1, and is coordinated by the Global Water Partnership (GWP) in collaboration with UNEP-DHI Centre and Cap-Net.

For more information please refer to <https://www.gwp.org/en/sdg6support/gender> or write to sdg6iwrmsp@gwp.org.