2025

POLICY NOTE

Mainstreaming gender equality in water resources management

Global status and 7 pathways to progress

This policy note is a call to action for all practitioners working in water management and gender mainstreaming worldwide. With only five years left to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and SDG 6 on water and sanitation, urgent action is needed to scale up efforts and accelerate joint progress. Drawing on the latest assessment of SDG indicator 6.5.1 on integrated water resources management (IWRM) and country-level insights, this note highlights key challenges in gender mainstreaming within water resources management and identifies powerful enablers of progress towards both goals. These enablers include fostering political will at the highest levels, developing detailed plans with dedicated budgets, and ensuring effective participation of women and parity in decision-making and technical roles. Additional enablers, such as collaboration and partnerships across institutions on gender equality, robust monitoring, and education initiatives, are shown to be critical for achieving transformative and inclusive water governance.

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Key Messages

1. **Gender mainstreaming in water resources management is essential for achieving both gender equality (SDG 5) and water security (SDG 6).** In the current context of the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises, strengthening gender mainstreaming is crucial to ensure water resources management practices benefit all members of society equally.
2. **Global progress on gender mainstreaming in water resources management is uneven, slow, and off track.** Data from SDG indicator 6.5.1, on the implementation of integrated water resources management (IWRM), shows that global progress on gender mainstreaming is too slow, and substantial disparities can be seen between countries. Implementation on the ground typically lags behind policies and plans. However, significant steps are being taken by governments and non-governmental organisations around the world, which are to be commended and learned from.
3. **Countries face multiple challenges to translate high-level commitments on gender mainstreaming into concrete actions within water resources management.** Countries highlight three key challenges: (1) water-specific gender mainstreaming frameworks often lack detailed plans, sufficient capacity, dedicated funding, and political will for implementation; (2) the absence of sex-disaggregated and other intersectional data undermines effective monitoring and accountability; and (3) the underrepresentation of women in decision-making and technical roles within water resources management limits progress and effective implementation of commitments.
4. **Experiences from countries point to seven particularly powerful enablers for mainstreaming gender in water resources management.** These cover executive leadership, legal frameworks, funding, practical frameworks for participation, monitoring, education, and coordinated action on gender across the water, climate and environment sectors. This note includes practical examples from countries for each enabler.

1. Gender mainstreaming in water resources management is essential for achieving both gender equality and water security

Implementing integrated water resources management (IWRM) is critical to support societies, economies, and the environment. Increasing pressures such as climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, also known as the triple planetary crisis, are impacting the availability of, and access to, water resources globally, hindering sustainable development.

Vulnerable populations, such as women and girls living in poverty, are among the most severely affected due to their limited ability to mitigate the impacts of water-related shocks. Globally, an estimated 1.5 billion women and girls live in countries facing high or very high exposure to droughts. Flood exposure, resulting from rising sea levels, extreme rainfall, and intense hurricanes, threatens an estimated 3.7 billion women and girls globally (Azcona et al. 2023).

Women's vulnerability is further exacerbated by the climate crisis as it is driving increased levels of gender-based violence. Economic instability, floods, food insecurity, and elevated rates of poverty, among other factors, correspond with increases in gender-based violence, including physical and sexual violence and early and forced marriage. The 2022 drought in the Horn of Africa, for example, resulted in a nearly fourfold increase in child marriage in affected areas of Ethiopia (Davies 2022; OCHA 2022; Van Daalen et al. 2022).

Gender equality and access to water are fundamental human rights and have both been reflected in Agenda 2030 and the SDGs through SDG 5 to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' and SDG 6 to 'Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all'. Women and girls play an essential role in their communities as users, collectors, and managers of water. A feminist approach to water resources management (WRM) recognises women's, especially Indigenous women's, continued contribution to effectively managing and conserving water resources. It demands their equal representation in leadership and decision-making (Box 1). The approach draws a clear link between women's rights and the right to clean water, and the rights of water as a sacred resource, demonstrating that to accelerate SDG 6, countries need to accelerate SDG 5, and vice versa (Azcona et al. 2023).

Box 1: Indigenous Women: Guardians of Water, Land, and Biodiversity

Water, land, biodiversity, and the protection and flourishing of these sacred resources are the basis of many of the world's Indigenous cultures. Indigenous women and girls and their communities have worked tirelessly, and at personal peril, to expand protections and transform Indigenous values and local ecological knowledge into enforceable ecological rights.

In India, women from Indigenous communities have been instrumental in blocking the depletion and contamination of water resources by multilateral corporations. In Brazil, Indigenous women are engaging in collective actions, including forming surveillance groups, to defend their ancestral lands and protect their water resources.

The work of land and water defenders worldwide has led to significant reforms, including greater recognition of the "rights-of-Nature" to exist and flourish. As of September 2022, 24 countries had formally adopted "rights-of-Nature" provisions in their legal systems. However, the low representation of women, including Indigenous women and local communities, in water management and other decision-making bodies, has hindered the full transformative potential of these reforms.

Sources: Azcona et al. 2023; Kauffman 2022; Palamim 2025; Global Witness 2022; McGregor 2013; Tran and Hanaček 2023.

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2. Global progress on gender mainstreaming in water resources management is uneven, slow, and off track

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is monitored globally through SDG 5, with target 5.5 being to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life". As progress on indicators 5.5.1 and 5.5.2 is slow and off track, it is vital that efforts are accelerated in all sectors. While there is no dedicated target or indicator under SDG 6 to monitor gender mainstreaming in water and sanitation, some of the indicators have gender-disaggregated data, including indicator 6.1.1 on drinking water, 6.2.1 on sanitation, 6.5.1 on IWRM , and 6.b.1 on local management and participation in water and sanitation.

SDG indicator 6.5.1, on the implementation of IWRM[1], includes a question on the degree of gender mainstreaming in WRM in its survey[2]. Through this question, countries evaluate the existence of gender mainstreaming objectives in water-related laws, policies, plans or strategies, and the effectiveness of their implementation[3]. Global average scores on gender mainstreaming in water resources management show a slight increase from 54% in 2020 to 58% in 2023[4]. Despite this global progress, in 2023 around 15% of countries still had no gender mainstreaming mechanisms (countries in red and dark orange in Figure 1), and 31% of countries had limited implementation, budget or monitoring of their gender mainstreaming mechanisms (countries in yellow in Figure 1). Only 27% of countries reported mostly achieving gender objectives in their national water management frameworks (light and dark blue countries in Figure 1).

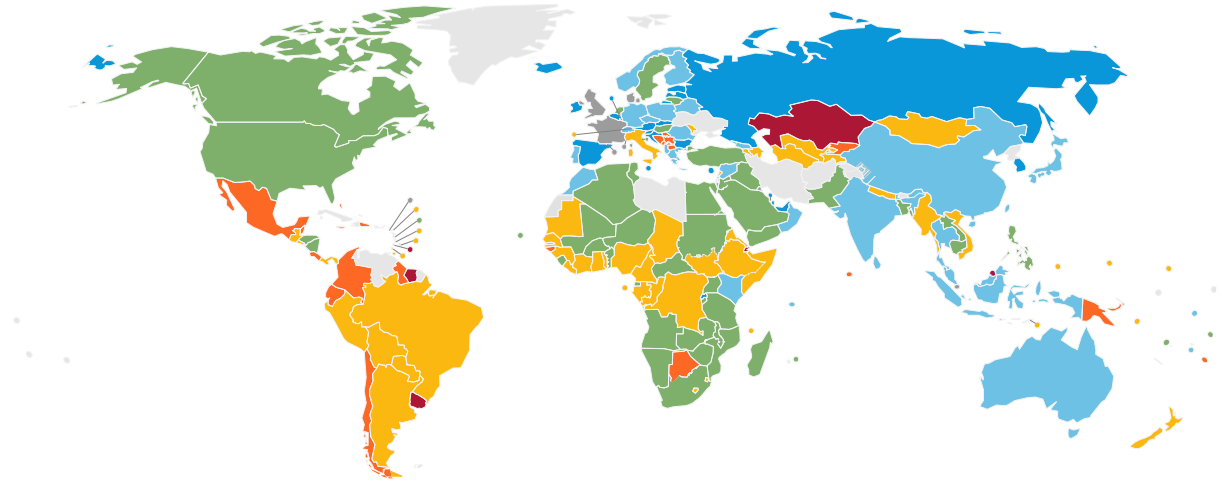

Figure 1. Gender mainstreaming in WRM (SDG indicator 6.5.1, question 2.2d, 2023).

[1] Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) is defined as "a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources in order to maximize economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems and the environment" (GWP 2000).

[2] Question 2.2d. For each question, countries provide a score of 0 – 100%, representing very low to very high degree of implementation, respectively. Countries accompany the score with a descriptive text which provides a significant amount of contextual information to understand the key challenges and enablers behind the scoring.

[3] All country scores and free-text responses to SDG 6.5.1 questions 2.2d on gender, as well as 2.2c on vulnerable groups, can be found in the Global Gender Mainstreaming in WRM Database.

[4] The 2017 score was 45, though minor differences in methodology, and some misinterpretation of the question by countries, means this score is not directly comparable with the 2020 and 2023 scores.

3. Countries face multiple challenges to translate high-level commitments on gender mainstreaming into concrete actions within the water sector

Through their answers to the SDG 6.5.1 survey question on gender mainstreaming in WRM, countries highlighted three key challenges appearing to limit progress.

1. **Water-specific gender mainstreaming frameworks often lack detailed plans, sufficient capacity, dedicated funding, and political will for implementation.** Although around 30% of countries report having some mechanisms on gender mainstreaming in place, many highlight that implementation on the ground is weak (e.g. Liberia, Vietnam, Ghana). Weak implementation can be explained by several factors, including lack of training and innovation in water resources management, as well as insufficient financial resources dedicated to gender in WRM from national budgets (e.g. Yemen, Bolivia, Côte d'Ivoire).

2. **The absence of sex-disaggregated and other intersectional data affects the quality of monitoring on gender to inform decision-making.** Insufficient sex-disaggregated data including on the participation and engagement of different groups of women, means countries cannot properly monitor the impacts of their gender-related programmes and policies in water resources management and thus make informed decisions or identify priority areas for improvement (e.g. Lebanon, Dominica, Burkina Faso). Moreover, women from marginalised and historically excluded groups face significant challenges that are made invisible by the lack of intersectional data.

3. **The underrepresentation of women in decision-making and technical roles within water resources management limits progress and effective implementation of commitments.** This is seen as a barrier by several countries (e.g. Chile, Benin). Cultural constraints as well as lack of awareness initiatives on the importance of equal representation for all genders, have been identified as factors for women's underrepresentation in decision-making and technical roles (e.g. Cameroon, Colombia). This is often coupled with a limited access to education programmes and capacity-development initiatives within the technical fields relevant to water resources management for women and girls (e.g. Nicaragua), which further exacerbates underrepresentation.

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4. Experiences from countries point to seven particularly powerful enablers for mainstreaming gender in water resources management

To overcome these complex challenges, focusing on intervention areas that could generate the greatest impact presents a good starting point. Seven enablers have been identified based on SDG 6.5.1 survey answers and national focal point interviews (GWP and UNEP-DHI 2021).

Seven enablers of gender mainstreaming in water resources management

1. Advocacy, commitment, and political will

Foster a strong commitment to gender mainstreaming among the executive leadership at the national level. High-level political commitment across sectors, supported by accountability mechanisms, ensures that political discourse is translated into concrete actions.

2. Legislative and governance mechanisms

Explicitly integrate gender into water laws, policies, and strategies. An egalitarian constitution is an important foundation, but on its own is insufficient to bring systemic change and should therefore be coupled with specific strategies addressing barriers to gender equality.

3. Human capital and financial resources

Allocate earmarked funding and human capital to gender mainstreaming in water resources management. Funds dedicated to gender equality priority areas, as well as gender specialists and gender-focused activities, are primarily found in human rights programmes but should also be integrated into policy areas not typically flagged under 'gender equality' – such as water resources management.

4. Effective participation and parity

Set up supportive frameworks for effective participation and parity of women in the development and implementation of policies, programmes, and projects. Moving beyond gender representation quotas, women, including women from historically marginalised vulnerable groups, must be engaged throughout all steps of decision-making on water resources management, ensuring they have meaningful input and influence.

5. Monitoring systems to track and assess progress

Establish monitoring systems with the capacity to collect sex-disaggregated and intersectional data, and the technical skills to design gender-responsive indicators. Water authorities have the responsibility to actively engage in the design and implementation of monitoring systems that track the impacts of gender programmes and identify priority areas for intervention. When possible, these systems should be aligned with existing national monitoring systems to ensure consistency.

6. Awareness raising, capacity development, and education

Invest in education, awareness raising, and capacity development, to redefine cultural practices around the inclusion of women in decision-making. Such investments are crucial to challenge societal norms about women's roles and enhance their opportunities to acquire essential knowledge and skills to participate in policy and decision-making within WRM.

7. Multi-stakeholder, intersectoral coordination mechanisms and bodies

Form multi-stakeholder and intersectoral coordination mechanisms and bodies, to ensure coordinated action on gender across climate, environment, water and related sectors. Such mechanisms and bodies can interact with stakeholders, raise awareness and reinforce capacity development, while establishing goals and monitoring progress on gender equality across sectors.

Enabler	Examples
 1. Advocacy, commitment, and political will	In **Nicaragua**, the Ministry of Women (MINIM) was created in 2013 to formulate, coordinate, execute, and evaluate government policies, plans, programmes, and projects that guarantee the participation of women in development processes, including water resources management. In **South Africa**, there is strong political will for gender mainstreaming. All government departments are given a mandate from the President of South Africa to establish Transformation Units responsible for gender mainstreaming and the empowerment of women and youth as well as people with disabilities.
 2. Legislative and governance mechanisms	In **Morocco**, gender is specifically included in the new draft water law which specifies a level of representation of women in the High Council for Water and Climate, the Water Basin Councils and the Provincial Water Committees. Substantial steps are being taken to anchor gender equality institutionally through the reorganisation of annual budgets and the integration of gender in the National Water Plan. In **Rwanda**, the National Water Resources Management Policy, recognises that gender equality must be promoted in all programmes and activities related to water resources management.
 3. Human capital and financial resources	In **Cambodia**, gender responsive IWRM is included in the 5-year Strategic Plan of Water Resources and Meteorology as well as in water resources projects with earmarked budgets for implementation to achieve the set indicators. In **Zimbabwe**, focal points responsible for gender policy and gender concerns are in place in authorities that deal with water resources.
 4. Effective participation and parity	In **Vanuatu**, a provision in the amended Water Resources Management Act requires that all local water committees have 40% of women members which is implemented through the registration of local water committees – committees without 40% women will not be registered. Women's participation in **Grenada** is at a very good level today, as a result of the strong involvement of women in political issues and policies since the late 1970s. There is an enabling environment in the country that facilitates participation and allows women to voice their opinion, actively participate, and shape policy.
 5. Monitoring systems to track and assess progress	In **Canada**, the government uses a system called Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) in the development of all policies, programmes, and legislation. GBA Plus is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities as well to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender-diverse people may experience policies, programmes, and initiatives. In **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, there are monthly and annual reports from the Lao Women's Union meetings where every sector reports the progress made in the past year.
 6. Awareness raising, capacity development, and education	In **Austria**, the Ministries of Environment and Climate have set up two networks to promote gender mainstreaming: we4DRR, which supports women working on research or policy in disaster risk reduction, and FEMtech, which supports women in research and technology, including in the water sector. In **Brazil**, the National Water and Sanitation Agency (ANA) Gender Committee is developing the Platform 'Elas Existem (they (female plural pronoun) exist)' with different functionalities to support women which include: displaying pictures from events (e.g. the climate change events) showing the lack of women in discussion panels, and having a database with CVs of women experts and search functions.
 7. Multi-stakeholder, intersectoral coordination mechanisms and bodies	In **Dominica**, representatives of the Bureau of Gender Affairs and Dominica National Council of Women are specifically invited to consultation workshops during the development of IWRM related policy and plans. In **Cabo Verde**, the National Water Council is a member of the National Institute for Gender Equality and Equity, a national body that supervises gender mainstreaming at all levels.

The country examples presented in this section are some of many best practices detailed in the country responses to the SDG 6.5.1 2023 survey. To explore more country examples please read through the Global Gender Mainstreaming in WRM Database.

5. Way forward

With only five years left to achieve SDG 5 and SDG 6, efforts to integrate gender in water resources management need to be accelerated. Moving beyond and eradicating gender stereotypes and biases requires a transformation of gender norms, a paradigm shift and eventually a cultural and behavioural change.

The seven enablers need to be urgently employed to ensure gender equality and the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. Water, environment and climate institutions must assume responsibility for gender mainstreaming within their respective areas of work, with support from, and in coordination with, national institutions with a mandate for gender equality.

Mainstreaming gender more thoroughly in water resources management presents a great opportunity to advance on these two key agendas in parallel, resulting in more informed and inclusive decision-making. This, in turn, will help implement effective measures to increase human and ecosystem resilience to impacts from the triple planetary crisis and pave the way for a fairer and more sustainable future for all.

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For further guidance on gender mainstreaming in water resources management please see:

The full report: "Advancing towards gender mainstreaming in water resources management" and the associated Summary Brief.

The free online course "Gender and Gender and Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)" available on Cap-Net.

The full report 'Spotlight on SDG 6: From commodity to common good: A feminist agenda to tackle the world's water crisis'

The Gender Snapshot series, which explores key finding on gender equality across all SDGs and is developed on a yearly basis.

The IWRM Action Searcher, where you can filter actions on gender defined by countries in their National IWRM Action Plans. These plans are developed through the SDG 6 IWRM Support Programme which assists governments in designing and implementing country-led responses to SDG indicator 6.5.1. Contact sdg6iwrmsp@gwp.org and iwrmsdg651@un.org to find out more!

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