

# Accelerating Gender Equality in the Water Domain: A Call for Action

UNESCO WWAP Water and Gender Working Group Position Paper



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## **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO):**

- Ilaria Sisto - Gender and Development Officer (Training and Capacity Enhancement)
- Maurizio Furst - Gender and Development Specialist
- Giorgia Prati - Migration and Rural Development Specialist

## **World Bank:**

- Kamila Galeza - Social Development Specialist
- Sarah Keener - Senior Social Development Specialist, Team Lead, Social Inclusion in Water

## **Center for Mediterranean Integration, World Bank:**

- Frederic de Dinechin - Senior Knowledge Management Officer
- Asma Bachikh - Water Specialist
- Ines Gasmi - Water and Youth Specialist

## **Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC):**

- Silvia Saravia-Matus - Economic Affairs Officer
- Marina Gil - Senior Economic Affairs Assistant

## **African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW):**

- Obinna Richfield Anah - Knowledge Management and Information Sharing Officer
- Emmanuel Uguru - Monitoring Support Officer and Youth Focal Point

## **Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITERD), Spain:**

- Manuel Menéndez Prieto - Special Advisor, Cabinet of the Secretary of State of the Environment
- Concepción Marcuello Olona - Coordinator of International Water Issues, Directorate General of Water
- Mar Gracia Plana - Support Unit, the Directorate General for Water
- Ana Puy - Head of the Equality Unit

## **Ministry of Infrastructure, Argentina:**

- Gustavo Fabián Villa Uría - Under-Secretary of Hydraulic Infrastructure and President of the Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme (IHP) National Committee, Argentina
- José María Regueira - National Director, Drinking Water and Sanitation Department
- Lucía Salamone - Technical Assistant, Gender Focal Person

## **National Water Institute (INA), Argentina:**

- Juan Carlos Bertoni - President
- Luciana Cobarbo - Deputy Manager of Human Resources, Gender Focal Person
- Silvia Rafaelli - Senior Researcher, Director, Coastal Regional Centre
- Patricia López - Senior Researcher, Andean Regional Centre
- Brenda Faro - Senior Researcher, Andean Regional Centre
- Diana Chavasse - Senior Researcher, Hydrological Services

- Leticia Vicario - Senior Researcher, Centre for the Semi-Arid Region

**National Women's Institute (INAMU), Costa Rica:**

- María Ester Serrano Madrigal - Coordinator, Building Identities and Life Projects Department
- Suiyen Ramírez Villegas - Programme Specialist, Building Identities and Life Projects Department

**Water for Women Fund, Australian Government initiative implemented by GHD Australia Pty Ltd.:**

- Alison Baker - Fund Manager
- Joanna Mott - Gender and Social Inclusion Advisor
- Kate Orr - Knowledge and Learning Manager

**World Wildlife Fund, United States of America (WWF-US):**

- Sarah Davidson - Director for Water Policy

**Women for Water Partnership (WfWP) and NetWater:**

- Maria Johanna Elisabeth (Mariet) Verhoef-Cohen - President of WfWP
- Boleslaw M. (Lasha) Witmer - WfWP Steering Committee Member / Independent Consultant
- Anna Maria Francisca (Annemiek) Jenniskens - Former Executive Director of WfWP / Independent Consultant
- Weerahenedige Marie Kusum Placida (Kusum) Athukorala - WfWP Steering Committee Member, and Chair of NetWater, Sri Lanka

**University of California, Berkeley, United States of America:**

- Isha Ray - Professor, Energy and Resources Group

**Florida International University, United States of America:**

- Maria C. Donoso - International Programs Director, UNESCO Chair on Sustainable Water Security, Faculty Fellow, Office to Advance Women, Equity and Diversity
- Suzanna M. Rose - Vice Provost, Office to Advance Women, Equity and Diversity

**McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada:**

- Panthea Pouramin - Researcher, McMaster University

**University of Pisa, Italy:**

- Viviana Re - Assistant Professor, Department of Earth Sciences

**United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) and McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada:**

- Nidhi Nagabhatla - UNU-CRIS Research Fellow, Bruges, Belgium and Adjunct Professor, School of Earth, Environment and Society, McMaster University, Hamilton

**UNESCO internal reviewers**

**Gender Equality Division, Office of the Director-General:**

- Damiano Giampaoli - Programme Specialist
- Bruno Zanobia - Consultant

**International Centre for Water Security and Sustainable Management (i-WSSM), Republic of Korea:**

- Christine Kyu Yeong Kim - i-WSSM Programme Specialist
- Sukkyung Sung - i-WSSM Programme Specialist
- Saebhom Kim - i-WSSM Programme Specialist

**UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science in Asia and the Pacific:**

- Hans Thulstrup - Officer-in-Charge / Senior Programme Specialist, UNESCO Office in Jakarta

**This Position Paper was reviewed and edited by the Water and Gender Team of the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) Secretariat:**

Director: Michela Miletto

Senior Water and Gender Programme Officer:  
Laura Imburgia

Communication and Gender Programme Officer:  
Laurens Thuy

Junior Gender and Publications Consultant: Martina Favilli

Fellows: Hanouf Alyami, Han Chen, Ahmed Quotah

Interns: Giulia Cadoni, Candelaria Landín Moreno

Gender Advisors:

Gender and Water Specialist: Vasudha Pangare

Gender, Water and Human Rights Specialist: Paola Piccione

# 1. Introduction

Safe and adequate water availability for the home, the farm and the community is central to gender equality and to the health, well-being and dignity of all people. Yet 25 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, for too many people, gender equality remains out of reach in the context of safe and accessible water. This Position Paper is a call for the global community to take immediate priority action to achieve the twin goals of ensuring safe and secure water for all and ensuring that women participate and have a voice in water-related policies and decisions.

The Position Paper is based on many months of discussions and analyses led by the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) Water and Gender Working Group, as reflected in the analysis document [Taking Stock of Progress Towards Gender Equality in the Water Domain](#). It includes diverse contributions from international and regional organizations, governmental institutions, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local and national women leaders. The work was guided by three overarching frameworks promoting water as a human right, water for the achievement of gender equality and sustainability, and gender-sensitive climate adaptation water policies. Numerous studies and research papers were analysed and supplemented by the Water and Gender Working Group's expertise; this resulted in an evidence-based synthesis of the current status of gender in the water sector. Key challenges were identified with respect to: the human right to water; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for all, water for domestic and for agricultural use, and work; climate change adaptation; water governance; education and training needed to hold positions of authority within the water sector; and data gaps on gender in the water sector. The challenges involved in and the priority recommendations for the achievement of gender equality in the water sector are summarized below, with particular attention to both proximate and deep-rooted causes of gender-based inequalities in the sector.

Based on the findings of this analysis, we urge world leaders in all domains – governments, United Nations bodies, the private sector, civil society and community-based organizations, women and youth leaders, and educational and faith-based institutions – to rise to the challenge of ensuring water for all and ensuring the meaningful participation of women in the domain of water. It is time to abandon incremental business-as-usual approaches and embrace ambitious yet concrete actions towards a sustainable water domain through gender-equal pathways.

## 2. International policy frameworks

Three international frameworks guide this Position Paper: (i) the human rights-based approach (HRBA) to water and sanitation; (ii) the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and (iii) the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Building on a series of declarations and conferences, including the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, the United Nations officially declared access to safe drinking water and sanitation to be a human right<sup>1</sup>. The right to water and sanitation was deemed essential for the realization of many other rights, making it a “gateway” right. The aforementioned Declaration calls for the promotion of the full and equal participation of women in water-related decision-making, casting them not as beneficiaries of, but as change agents in, the effort to adopt the HRBA to water and sanitation. This is in line with the Dublin-Rio Principles (1992), which call for policies reflecting women’s pivotal role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water, addressing women’s specific needs, and empowering women in decision-making related to water.

In 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 5 calls for equality and empowerment for girls and women, and SDG 6 calls for universal access to safe water and sanitation, paying particular attention to the needs of women and girls. The SDGs are cross-cutting and include individual targets which are relevant to several Goals. For instance, Target 5.4 calls for the recognition of unpaid labour through the provision of public services and infrastructure; this Target is relevant to both women’s empowerment (SDG 5) and universal access to (domestic) water (SDG 6). The integration of gender equality is not consistent across SDGs or even within SDG 6 itself, however. Moreover, SDG-relevant data collected and presented by household may conceal intra-household inequalities.

The third guiding framework, the UNFCCC, recognizes that climate change disproportionately affects low-income and rural women<sup>2</sup>. This led to the explicit incorporation of gender equality into the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change. The UNFCCC promotes intersectional approaches to climate policies and avoids stereotyping women as either environmental victims or sustainability saviours<sup>3</sup>.

All these frameworks and policy guidelines urge universal access to safe and adequate water as a human right, while highlighting the importance of greater autonomy and decision-making power for women in the domain of water. In particular, the SDGs and the UNFCCC explicitly recognize that gender equality is essential for just and sustainable transitions in the face of the climate crisis. Despite these policy efforts, however, it has been noted that water and climate policies actually remain siloed away from gender policies<sup>4</sup>, resulting in a gap between policy and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> [Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment No. 15 \(2002\); General Assembly resolution 64/292 \(2010\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Further work on this issue has been done by the Lima Work Programme on Gender: <https://unfccc.int/topics/gender/workstreams/the-enhanced-lima-work-programme-on-gender>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. UN-Women World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014

<sup>4</sup> UN-Women and UNESCO, forthcoming

### 3. Current status

In this section, we synthesize the findings on the status of women with respect to the following human rights: water and sanitation; water and work; inclusion in water governance, education and training to participate in the water sector<sup>5</sup>; and data on access to and availability of water and sanitation services.

Ensuring the human right to water (and sanitation) requires accessible, available and affordable water which is safe for drinking, cooking and hygiene. Treated piped water is the highest rung of the service ladder; as at 2017, an estimated 63.5% of households globally were served by piped water<sup>6</sup>. At the other end, 1.6 billion people live in households in which someone must walk to collect (improved) water; most of the people having to collect water this way are women and girls, who pay the price in preventable diseases, stress, musculoskeletal trauma, sexual assault and time lost. Beyond the household, one in six health-care facilities have no handwashing stations, which are crucial for combatting coronavirus disease (COVID-19); the lack of these stations increases risks for patients and front-line (majority female) health-care workers. Inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene in schools reduce the attendance of post-puberty girls, as well as female teachers, showing why water and sanitation are considered gateway or precursor rights.

Water is necessary for productive work, as well as domestic and care work. In almost all countries, social norms dictate that women should carry a disproportionate share of household and care work. Such work includes preparing meals, housekeeping, managing scarce water resources, maintaining animals and kitchen plots, and running microenterprises. These activities are all impeded by the crises of local water scarcity and global climate change; furthermore, the labour is usually unpaid and, even when revenue-generating, is generally unaccounted for in official statistics<sup>7</sup>. Household responsibilities aside, 32% of employment in agriculture is female; cultural norms dictate the nature of the work, often relegating women to the lower end of the economic value chain. Women farmers and marginal landholders do not have equal access to water rights because water rights are usually allocated to men, who hold the formal land titles. As climate change shrinks the amount of water available for farming, women are rendered more vulnerable with respect to income security, as well as food security<sup>8</sup>. When intersecting marginalities come into play, as is the case for indigenous or ethnic-minority women, these vulnerabilities become all the more acute.

Women are also underrepresented in the formal water sector (e.g. utilities) but overrepresented in the lowest-paid jobs in the informal sector (e.g. cleaning out unsewered latrines). Multi-country studies have shown that under 20% of employees in the water and sanitation utilities are women, who are paid on average less than their male counterparts<sup>9</sup>. The equivalent gender-based data on employment in the informal sector are generally missing. Existing gender norms, stereotyping of women's capacities, and sexual harassment at work contribute to women's low numbers in formal water institutions. Recent surveys,

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<sup>5</sup> Job creation and training in the water sector are key recommendations for accelerating the achievement of the SDGs (UN-Water, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> <https://washdata.org/data/household#!/dashboard/new>

<sup>7</sup> UN-Women and UNESCO, forthcoming

<sup>8</sup> FAO. 2017. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World. <http://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition/2017/en>

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO and UN-Water, 2016; World Bank, 2019

however, show that female employment in utilities is increasing, even though the baseline for this increase is low<sup>10</sup>. Greater gender parity in positions of authority could influence infrastructure decisions and financial allocations to essential services.

All institutions reflect and reproduce social norms and disparities, so it is no surprise that institutions for water governance have few women overall, and even fewer women in positions of authority. While a study conducted by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) showed that 61% of countries support women's participation in natural resource management as a matter of policy, fewer than half provided targeted support to enable participation in practice, clearly illustrating the gap between policy and implementation<sup>11</sup>. Women are severely underrepresented in water ministries around the world and are nearly invisible in transboundary water governance<sup>12</sup>.

The low level of women's participation in water management and water governance is at least partly due to the low level of women's education and training for technical and leadership positions in the water sector. The water sector is dominated by professionals with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) training, and gender stereotypes prevent many women from obtaining the degrees they would need to work as water professionals. Surveys in East Africa, for instance, have found that even when managers are open to hiring more women, few women apply for jobs in the sector. Women face entry barriers (e.g. stereotypes and gender biases in the hiring process) in the water sector, disabling environments after entry and wage discrimination, in addition to lack of support if they are young mothers<sup>13</sup>.

We find that a combination of factors keeps too many people from accessing safe water, too many women from occupying decision-making positions in water management, and too many communities from receiving the support needed for achieving gender parity. These factors are: non-fulfilment of the human rights to water and sanitation; unequal enjoyment of the right to water for agricultural production; the low level of women's participation in local and national institutions which manage and govern water; on-paper policy support for women's participation without strong backing for such participation in practice; pervasive gender stereotyping; and unequal opportunities for all genders to train for skilled jobs in the water sector. Climate change, of course, exacerbates all these difficulties.

Yet the information which we have today may underestimate the extent of gender inequality in access to water and the crucial work which women do to ensure water security. Only one in three countries routinely collects sex-disaggregated data for informal employment, unpaid labour, home-based entrepreneurship or time use. No country systematically collects sex-disaggregated data on intra-household water uses and water and sanitation access. We cannot assume that the water available to a household is equally accessible to all its members. Few data are available on the occupational health of women and girls who fetch water, or on the physical and psychological health of women carrying out high-risk and low-paid work in the sanitation sector.

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<sup>10</sup> World Bank Group, 2019

<sup>11</sup> ECOSOC, 2019

<sup>12</sup> See Fauconnier et al., 2018.

<sup>13</sup> WSUP, 2020; Leahy et al., 2017

## 4. Going forward

Much progress has been made since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, but much work still remains to be done<sup>14</sup>. We highlight five key suggestions for action which can form the foundation for gender equality in the water sector and for the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation for all. These steps can enhance the bargaining power of women, increase their options, make their contributions visible and valuable to all, and thus support lives of dignity and self-worth for all<sup>15</sup>.

### ***(i) Act upon principles of gender-equal funding***

Funding better water services for the underserved is always a challenge. Safely managed drinking water access calls for water to be delivered as close as feasible to the premises in question<sup>16</sup>; water service for smallholders calls for investments which promote women's leadership and protect their water rights. It is not easy for low- and middle-income countries to invest in water systems, especially those for unserved populations that may be hard to reach. In this context, the mobilization of international and donor assistance and better targeting of existing funding will be of key importance. It is, however, important for funding policies to ensure that water investments no longer rely on the unpaid work of women and girls. The Green Climate Fund provides a good example of gender mainstreaming and gender assessment as requirements for all projects<sup>17</sup>. We do not believe that more funding alone will ensure safe and secure water rights for all. Public financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action has been shown to fall short, and gender strategies in the water sector are seldom funded adequately. Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, SDGs related to reducing inequalities were among the least funded<sup>18</sup>, undermining momentum towards the achievement of the overall aims of the Agenda, and highlighting the need for rebalanced gender-based opportunities.

### ***(ii) Narrow the gap between policy and practice***

Pervasive gaps between stated policy and its implementation show that political leaders and water sector leaders know that water is a human right which remains unavailable to millions of women and men, and that women's voices are essential to reaching gender parity in water-related decision-making. At all levels of water policy, governments are encouraged to protect women's land and water rights, strengthen regulatory frameworks for accountability and redress when gender-equal policies are flouted, and realistically assess the gendered consequences of new policies and their likely implementation. In short, more States must live up to the implicit social contract they have with their citizens; upholding women's rights and water rights are part of this social contract. Community-based organizations working on water rights or women's rights have a key role in holding their governments accountable and staying vigilant with respect to emerging circumstances which could cause laudable policy goals to slip in practice.

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<sup>14</sup> The Action Coalition on Feminist Action for Climate Justice has updated the Beijing Platform to include aspects of climate change which were not present in the original Declaration: <https://forum.generationequality.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/UNW%20Action%20Coalitions%20-%20AC%20Leaders%20-%2017%20December%202020.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> See Nussbaum, 2000

<sup>16</sup> <https://washdata.org/monitoring/drinking-water>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.greenclimate.fund/document/gcf-b24-15>

<sup>18</sup> See Sethi et al., 2017.



### ***(iii) Foster women's leadership beyond participation***

In order to foster women's leadership at all levels, all institutions, especially those in the water sector, need to go beyond tokenistic participation or participation which increases women's labour contributions but not their authority. Tokenistic mainstreaming efforts can be only partially successful, and mandatory inclusion rules imposed by NGOs and donors have often not taken into account existing social barriers, even when these are well known<sup>19</sup>. Moving beyond women's participation to women's leadership calls for strategic gender mainstreaming within practical possibilities, capacity development (for all genders, at all levels of decision-making), and the deliberate promotion of environments in which women's leadership is accepted. There is encouraging evidence that villages with women leaders tend to invest more in basic infrastructure, such as roads and drinking water, and that services-oriented priorities are also reflected when more women are represented in national-level leadership<sup>20</sup>.

### ***(iv) Counter norms and stereotypes which disadvantage women and girls***

Policies and practices which support genuine inclusion of women's (and girls') rights in the water sector and beyond, and which foster environments in which women's leadership gradually becomes normalized require focused efforts to counter norms, stereotypes and taboos which are still prevalent in many contexts. Norms and stereotypes which disadvantage women's roles in the workplace or in the community include social expectations of women's work at home, implicit taboos with respect to where they should or should not work, pervasive impressions that men cannot work under more senior women, and sexual harassment. Public interest messaging, school curricula, and local and national leaders, celebrities and influencers could all contribute to the aforementioned efforts. Public interest messaging which recognizes and values women's unpaid care work in the home and in the community is important; by contrast, prevailing norms simultaneously demand and devalue such work. As opportunities grow for women and girls to be educated, to hold paid jobs, to enter male-dominated fields of study, and to know and assert their legal rights, these opportunities and the efforts to counter norms and stereotypes can become mutually reinforcing.

### ***(v) Prioritize collection of sex-disaggregated data***

Even if the four recommendations above are meticulously followed, we cannot assess their impact without sex-disaggregated data. Data by sex are routinely collected in the education, health, and (formal) employment sectors, but data on water access or climate adaptation are usually presented by household. Yet the household is a social unit with power imbalances within it; better information is needed on who has the right to water, how much labour goes into accessing water, who does the work, who uses and benefits from the water, and the purposes for which the water is used. This requirement is commensurate with the human right to water, which is an inalienable right of the individual rather than of the household. Likewise, we have little systematic data on who adapts to climate-induced water source changes and on the ways in which such adaptation takes place. UNESCO WWAP has developed a useful toolkit to collect sex-disaggregated water data on a wide range of development topics<sup>21</sup>; the United Nations Statistics Division has also proposed a minimum set of gender-sensitive indicators for country-level data<sup>22</sup>. We recognize

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<sup>19</sup> Cornwall and Rivas, 2015

<sup>20</sup> Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Dongre, 2010; Jalal, 2014

<sup>21</sup> Miletto et al., 2019

<sup>22</sup> UNSD and DESA, 2020 (<https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com/>)

that collecting additional data burdens the technical and financial capacities of low-income countries<sup>23</sup>; therefore, this is a priority area for capacity development and financial support. In short, sex-disaggregated data on water access, use and control are essential for monitoring the progressive realization of the HRBA to water and sanitation and for “counting” the uncounted work which women do and the numerous daily decisions which they make. The call for such data has been repeatedly made by scholars and activists since at least the 1970s, and it is well past time to heed this call.

## 5. Call for Action

The first pillar of the Call for Action enjoins all members of the global community, from the Member States to the United Nations to community groups, to follow the key recommendations above, in their own distinct capacities and by drawing on their own comparative advantages. We mention here some priority actions.

Governments are the most important duty-bearers. They have the responsibility to: (i) fund water systems for all more generously; (ii) collect accurate information about households in underserved areas, disaggregated by sex and not by household or community; (iii) review subsidy policies to make water services more affordable for the poor and equally accessible to all; (iv) support and fund women’s and community-based groups so that they can organize to meet their own water and sanitation needs; (v) promote gender equality and dispel harmful gender stereotypes in all public service statements; (vi) set an example by hiring and elevating women in water-related agencies; and (vii) ensure equal wages for equal work. In other words, investing in water and countering harmful stereotypes go hand in hand, each reinforcing the other.

The United Nations agencies can further advance efforts to implement gender mainstreaming and can leverage their collective power to: (i) encourage Member States to mobilize funding for safe and affordable water infrastructures, especially for their poorest citizens; (ii) support Member States with programmes for enhancing their capacity with regard to water- and gender-related topics; and (iii) assist Member States with sex-disaggregated data collection methods and digitization. The grant-making and donor communities could support the States by increasing their investments in: the water and sanitation domains; awareness-raising and capacity development to elevate social inclusion; support of women-led initiatives; and the critical collection of sex-disaggregated data. Financial assistance needs to be deliberately redirected to prioritize low- and lower-middle-income countries, which is not always done today.

The private sector (including utilities) is well positioned to work with governments in order to raise capital for water systems, especially those focusing on innovative technologies and financing strategies which are sustainable for low-income communities, but which do not rely on the unpaid work of women. It can bring considerable advertising experience, using empowering images of women and girls, to bear on social marketing campaigns aimed at safe and productive water uses. Academic researchers could take it upon

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<sup>23</sup> UN-Women and UNESCO, forthcoming, p. 15

themselves to document and communicate (beyond academia) the economic, social and health impacts of safe water, sanitation and irrigation rights for women and girls. They can usefully focus their research on alternative technologies and creative financing options for making water services affordable to all, for home use and local economies, while taking care not to burden women and girls with more unpaid chores. Civil society, including faith-based, secular, and women's groups, can prioritize activities which raise women's voices so that women have an equal role in decisions on local water-related investments. Because they are close to communities, they can advise both governments and private utilities on strategies to ensure access to safe and affordable services. Most importantly, civil society has a watchdog mandate: civil society and the media are uniquely positioned to hold governments and the private sector accountable for extending basic services to all.

The second pillar concerns communication. Every group of stakeholders – and water is such a basic need that all groups are de facto stakeholders here – is encouraged to convey the suggested concrete actions to their respective audiences, through social media, traditional communications channels, works of art, films and official public communications. These recommendations and their urgency need to be communicated widely, building global awareness and a basis for public action. Media and communications have an invaluable role to play in informing various constituencies about international and national water fora, increasing their visibility. On the gender equality side, communications are invaluable for dismantling norms and stereotypes; fostering collaboration across genders and cultures; elevating the place of girls and women in education and water-related (and other) careers; and elevating the value of domestic work so that women's families and communities perceive their value to the household economy.

In short, this Call for Action, facilitated by the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme, aims to unite the global community in working to achieve the goal of water for all and ensuring that women have an equal voice in water-related decision-making and are empowered in the water sector. To this end, the call urges targeted outreach, concrete action in line with the recommendations in this paper, and political will which no longer falters. A safe, secure and equal water domain is nothing less than a form of freedom, and for too many women in too many regions it is still a long walk to freedom<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> We borrow this phrase from Nelson Mandela's 1995 autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Back Bay Books).

Despite the gendered aspects of water and sanitation coming increasingly to the forefront of the international agenda, women's key role in water management is still far from being reflected in their participation and representation at the governance level. As women remain disproportionately affected by a lack of access to water and sanitation services, and as the water sector remains characterized by persistent gender inequalities at all levels, it is clear that progress on the ground is off track. Nevertheless, policy instruments, best practices and methods for overcoming these challenges exist and could be readily implemented within enabling political and financial frameworks.

This Position Paper builds on the analysis document *Taking Stock of Progress Towards Gender Equality in the Water Domain* (UNESCO WWAP, 2021), whose findings stress that governments and decision-makers need urgently to implement gender-inclusive strategies to accelerate the achievement of gender equality in the water sector and to catalyse progress towards a more inclusive, sustainable and peaceful future.

In this Position Paper, UNESCO WWAP and a Multi-Stakeholder Coalition jointly call upon political leaders, decision-makers, governors and policymakers, financiers, CEOs and other relevant actors to take bold and urgent action to achieve twin goals: safe and secure water for all (under SDG 6) and women's participation and voice in water-related policies and decisions (under SDG 5). Concrete actions call for a narrowing of the gender gap between policy and practice. In particular, they require: accelerating the achievement of water access for all without discrimination; promoting women's leadership in water management and governance; protecting women's water rights; applying gender-equal financing; prioritizing the collection of sex-disaggregated water data; and countering norms and stereotypes which disadvantage women and girls.

This Position Paper forms part of the evidence-based material which supports a wide-scale, participatory advocacy initiative and Call for Action entitled *Accelerating Gender Equality in the Water Domain: Bridging the Data Gap and Developing Concrete Actions*. This Call for Action is promoted by UNESCO WWAP and a Multi-Stakeholder Coalition composed of Member State institutions, United Nations agencies, international and regional organizations, NGOs, ODAs and representatives of the private sector and civil society.



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