

Tapping our Potential: Women's Water Leadership in the Nile Basin

Women Have a Critical Role to Play in Inclusive and Effective Transboundary Water Governance



Photo: Elizabeth A. Yaari, SIWI

Cooperation over the shared water resources of the Nile Basin is essential to water security and development in the region. To mitigate and manage potential and actual drivers of water-related conflict in the region, improved and more inclusive resource decision-making is critical. Engaging a diverse cross-section of stakeholders in decisions around shared waters broadens the set of environmental and social impacts that are considered and the knowledge and skills employed to address them, thus increasing the likelihood of developing sustainable and equitable solutions. In the Nile Basin, SIWI and partners initiated a growing network of women water professionals active in transboundary water management under the 'Women and Water Diplomacy in the Nile (WIN)' platform to enhance the collective capacity of women throughout the basin and to support the engagement of these women water leaders in decision-making and peace building processes in the Basin.

From Policy to Action: Balancing Gender for Stronger Water Diplomacy

The critical role of women in water resources management and protection has been recognized and emphasized at the highest policy levels for over 25 years. The Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development (see box) was only the first of countless national, basin-level and international policy statements and guidance documents that stress the need for more gender-inclusive water governance processes at all levels¹. Yet, despite repeated high level commitments to engaging women in water governance, evidence reveals a persistent gender gap in the water sector. This gap is particularly evident at the transboundary level, where water governance processes continue to be dominated by men (Bazilli and Earle, 2013; IUCN, 2017).

Similarly, the transformative role of women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding has been repeatedly demonstrated,

¹See, e.g., The Beijing Platform for Action (2005); Rio Principle 20 (1992); Africa Water Vision 2025; The AMCOW Strategy and Policy for Mainstreaming Gender in the Water Sector in Africa (2011); and the Mekong River Commission Gender Policy and Strategy (2013).

Dublin Statement (1992) Principle 3:

Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.

This pivotal role of women as providers and users of water and guardians of the living environment has seldom been reflected in institutional arrangements for the development and management of water resources. Acceptance and implementation of this principle requires positive policies to address women's specific needs and to equip and empower women to participate at all levels in water resources programmes, including decision-making and implementation, in ways defined by them.

including research showing that gender inclusive peace processes are 35 per cent more likely to last at least 15 years, that peace agreements signed by women are positively associated with more durable peace, and that higher levels of gender equity are associated with a lower instance of conflict (Krause et. Al., 2018; UNSC, 2000). Despite this evidence and the formal recognition of the UN Security Council of the critical role of women in peace and security efforts, between 1990 and 2017 women constituted only 2 percent of mediators, 8 percent of negotiators and 5 percent of witnesses in all major peace processes. Women in transboundary water governance therefore face a battle on two fronts in overcoming the traditionally male-dominated worlds of water and peacebuilding (UN Women, 2018). Ensuring a better gender balance in water diplomacy efforts will require a sea change in perception of gender roles in both fields, accompanied by strong and implementable policies to overcome entrenched discrimination.

The persistent failure to include women equitably in political decision-making processes at the transboundary level undermines progress towards the cooperative and sustainable

management and development of internationally shared river basins and aquifers, as well as between jurisdictions in the same country. Women have differentiated knowledge that is vital to sustainable resource management, as well as differing responsibilities, priorities, and needs around water use and management. For example, they are not only responsible for the burden of water collection in 8 out of 10 households (WHO and UNICEF, 2017), but also make up more than half the agricultural workforce in many developing countries, thus playing a central role in managing and safeguarding water for both domestic and productive uses (FAO, 2017). Enabling women to have a meaningful voice in decision-making therefore provides an opportunity to include their distinctive knowledge, diverse perspectives and experiences to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of relevant water issues and challenges and to identify a broader set of equitable solutions to those challenges.

'I want to contribute to raise women's awareness and have them involved in decision making about water issues. It is a national security issue to have the whole of society engaged in water decision making processes.'

- WIN Participant Reflection

Barriers and Challenges. In order to move past broad policy statements on the importance of gender equity towards meaningful engagement of women in transboundary water governance, solutions must be tailored to the numerous barriers facing women currently engaged in and seeking to join water and peacebuilding professions. A broad survey of the literature supports the priority issues that were elevated by a diverse group of women water professionals from across the Nile Basin who participated in the Women and Water Diplomacy in the Nile (WIN) network and workshops, including parliamentarians, representatives of Ministries of Water and Foreign Affairs, and key educational and civil society organizations.

The experiences from the Nile Basin, which is comprised of 11 extremely diverse countries, provide important lessons for both broadening the network of women in the Nile Basin engaged effectively in water diplomacy, but also for initiating similar capacity support activities for women water professionals in other transboundary basins.

Key challenges highlighted by WIN workshop participants include:

Cultural beliefs and norms that emphasize men as decision-makers and diplomats and prevent women from having a voice in decisions even where they are present. Across diverse cultures throughout the Nile Basin, and echoing a sentiment elevated by women globally, women face censure for appearing "aggressive" when they voice their opinions in a professional setting. Even as an increasing number of women are earning higher degrees in relevant fields, persistent framing of water and peacebuilding professions as being a "male domain" stands in the way of women's educational and career advancement.

Inequities in educational opportunities, driven in part by the stereotypes described above, prevent girls and women from obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary to become competitive for leadership positions in the field. Oftentimes, the same

'The largest challenges now are societal norms; the men still think that women cannot make decisions even if they are in a position to do so. Women are not influential and our views are not taken seriously. Women think that if you are given a chance you should let the men first go and the women take the "leftovers" – it is the culture and norms.'

- WIN Participant Reflection

stereotypes that mitigate against women becoming water diplomats are perpetuated by existing educational systems, which discourage girls from focusing on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in their education and subsequently from pursuing technically focused water sector careers. Overcoming gender disparities in education, and particularly in higher education, requires holistic and integrated approaches that strengthen the capacity of countries to deliver gender-responsive education (Earle and Bazilli, 2013).

'We have so many women working in water now but when I joined I was the only one and I have worked hard to recruit more women. Most of us are at the low level. I want to contribute to a policy that will promote the women to reach higher levels in the sector.'

- WIN Participant Reflection

Persistent bias and discrimination in the workplace also continue to prevent women from performing their professional duties effectively, as well as from being able to advance successfully in their careers. Additionally, higher levels of job insecurity, comparatively lower pay levels, and sexual harassment all contribute to a workplace environment that makes it difficult for women to assert themselves and take on leadership roles. Women and Water Diplomacy in the Nile (WIN) participants reported that harassment persists in many countries, and women still face entrenched assumptions about what they "cannot" or "should not" do – e.g., physical labor, travel away from family – because they are women. They also noted that, in their experience in the Nile and beyond, women are consistently overlooked for training and development opportunities in favour of men (UN Water, 2016). Overall, few realistic policies and mechanisms exist for anti-discrimination training in the workplace and for holding co-workers and management accountable for gender discrimination.

Gaps in legal and institutional frameworks continue to undermine the enabling environment for supporting and advancing gender equity in transboundary water governance. In particular, in addition to the workplace discrimination issues noted above, three key areas must be addressed:

(1) National laws continue to lack gender specific provisions to ensure meaningful inclusion of women in water decision-making (RRI/ELI, 2019 forthcoming) and women continue to be underrepresented in all levels of institutional decision-making on water. At the transboundary level, in particular, the vast majority of both international and basin-level legal agreements fail to include any specific provisions addressing gender issues, often leading to a reinforcement of the status quo in implementation (Earle and Bazilli, 2013).



Photo: Maria Vink, SIWI



(2) At the national level, gender and water continue to be treated separately. A study of 65 countries by IUCN showed that only 15 per cent of those countries had a gender policy in their ministry and only 35 per cent had included gender-specific considerations in water policies (IUCN, 2017).

(3) Women's land and resource rights are generally much less secure than men's, undermining their potential economic gains, access to credit and food and water security. It also undermines women's ability to participate in decision-making processes at the local level where land tenure can be a requirement for such participation. In sub-Saharan Africa, women comprise only 15 percent of agricultural landholders; in Latin America, 18 percent (USAID, 2016).

Finally, the **lack of gender disaggregated data** in the water sector is a key impediment to identifying the full range of issues facing women and effectively monitoring progress towards gender equity. Despite the critical need for both qualitative and quantitative data to support progress, and recent efforts to support the development of gender-disaggregated water indicators, gender focus in international water surveys actually declined from 2008-2015 (UN WWAP, 2015).

Opportunities for Transformation: Women Water Leaders in the Nile and Beyond

The Women and Water Diplomacy in the Nile (WIN) network has succeeded in bringing women water professionals together to share their experiences and to enhance the collective capacity of women throughout the basin. The capacitated network at the heart of WIN, in turn, is alleviating regional tensions and promoting effective transboundary dialogue and joint action by bringing new perspective and innovative ideas to bear and by acting as positive agents of change in their respective countries.

“What I learned in this workshop will help me link the technical and the political aspects of my work because I meet these situations every day. Understanding my role as a leader is very important and (this workshop) showed me who I am and what I need to improve – it was eye opening.”
- WIN Participant Reflection

Despite the challenges enumerated above, a number of women throughout the Nile Basin have successfully risen to leadership positions at various levels of water governance. In these positions, they are contributing to more equitable and inclusive basin-level decision-making by elevating a gendered perspective on water and development issues, demonstrating the invaluable role that women play in transboundary cooperation and peacebuilding efforts, and mentoring colleagues across the basin. Over the course of two week-long workshops, SIWI brought these women water leaders together to provide technical capacity building on key topics in transboundary water diplomacy and to build relationships across basin countries to foster the creation of a network of women water leaders as a platform for ongoing external capacity support and peer-to-peer learning, exchange of practices, and shared project development.

The outcomes of these workshops were extremely successful, due in large part to the high level of commitment of the participants and their willingness to openly share experiences and knowledge to uncover underlying causes of gender inequities in the countries of the Nile and identify meaningful opportunities to address those gaps. Across the diverse countries in the Nile Basin, the WIN participants agreed on the priority interventions at both the national and basin levels to increase inclusive and equitable basin-level decision-making that represents women's perspectives on water and development issues and broaden the network of women water leaders active throughout the Basin.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the outcomes of the two WIN workshops and capture the priority areas for further action identified by participants, as well as a broad review of relevant literature to ensure the relevance of the recommendations beyond the Nile Basin:

Enabling policies and legal frameworks to increase gender equity in water decision-making. Women water leaders and civil society organizations should work with decision-makers to support policy and legislative changes to reduce gender-based discrimination and create an enabling environment for women to become water decision-makers. Specifically, this should include:

- Affirmative action in women and girls' educational opportunities to encourage them to enter higher education in technical fields;
- Reforms to land tenure and property rights and inheritance regimes that fail to ensure women's equal rights to economic and water resources;
- Reforms of water sector laws to include specific provisions that require and support women's active and meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels; and
- Creation and implementation of effective policies and regulations to prohibit workplace discrimination, including pregnancy discrimination, and ensure that women have realistic mechanisms for redress in cases of sexual harassment or other forms of discrimination.

Education reforms to support girls' entry into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, as well as diplomatic professions. In addition to curriculum reforms that address existing gender biases, there should also be ongoing professional development for educators on creating and maintaining gender-inclusive classrooms and schools, as well as targeted mentorship programmes to bring professional women into schools to work with and encourage girls.

Male champions. Men and women must both be engaged in changing mindsets and raising awareness of the need for women as leaders and decision-makers within the cultural context in which they are working. Bringing male champions on board at high levels to speak directly to other men and to demonstrate that this is not just a “woman's issue” has been shown to be an effective mechanism to bring about change.

Workplace policies and training on gender mainstreaming and women's issues. In addition to regulatory tools, ministries can immediately foster a work environment that is more conducive to gender equality by instituting mandatory trainings on gender-based issues, ensuring that discrimination is effectively dealt with, and providing women with mentorship and training opportunities to broaden their experience and increase their profile as effective leaders.

Increased research initiatives to support targeted interventions on gender equity in transboundary water governance. Such efforts would include building on ongoing efforts to create and implement meaningful gender-disaggregated indicators to provide meaningful data on women's differentiated experiences in water management and decision-making; capturing lessons from national and basin-level institutions related to their interventions on gender mainstreaming and promotion of women's engagement to inform policy and institutional reforms; targeted research on legal tools for effective gender inclusion at the transboundary level; and building on ongoing research to inform more integrated approaches to land and water tenure security.

Ongoing capacity enhancement and network support for the women involved in the WIN workshops to enable them to continue to share experiences, build their skills on water diplomacy, improve practices in their own countries, and potentially to replicate the experiences in and sharing the knowledge of the network with other shared basins.





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