



Gender and Water Policies

A gender policy refers to a public declaration in which an organisation or government commits to addressing gender issues responsibly and sets an agenda for action. In the context of water governance, gender policies can help guide decisions and achieve streamlined outcomes with the overall aim of achieving gender equality in the sector and beyond. This Tool discusses the benefits of developing gender policies and key aspects and steps needed to formulate effective gender and water policies.

Why Gender Policies Matter for Water Governance?

Gender policies and strategies for the water sector aim to address a wide range of gender-specific discrimination, e.g., women's exclusion from decision-making in water governance; unequal workload regarding water collection; unequal access to water due to land ownership laws; missing consideration of women's and girls' sanitation needs ([Tool B5.06](#)). A gender policy is a common starting point to mainstream efforts towards gender equality in an organisation and formalise specific steps, promote, and strategically strengthen them – while the long-term goal should be integrating gender into all policy documents. Implementing targeted policies and budgets means addressing structural gender inequalities and paves the way towards the progressive realisation of the human right to water and sanitation ([Tool A2.05](#)). Policies relate to both the external engagement of an organisation as well as its internal culture.

The [Gender and Water Alliance \(2003\)](#) summarises that a gender policy provides the following benefits:

- A valuable opportunity to involve staff and other key stakeholders in thinking through why gender is important to the organisations' work and what the implications are for practice ([Tool B5.01](#))
- A public statement of the organisation's commitment to taking gender issues seriously
- Agreed gender-related action and indicators of change
- An instrument of accountability against which to evaluate the organisations' performance ([Tool B5.02](#)).

Gender in High-Level Policies and Declarations

Gender in water-related policies have come a long way in the last few decades with a number of international commitments and declarations in that regard:

- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979:** The CEDAW defines gender-equal relations as the norm, within and beyond the household. This has been gradually linked with the human rights to water for both domestic uses and for livelihoods for women and men ([Van Koppen, 2017](#)).
- **The Dublin Principles of 1992:** constitute a landmark in the acknowledgement of women's essential role in the water sector. World leaders, governmental, academic, civil society, and nongovernmental water professionals recognised the interlinkage between water resource management, sustainable development, and gender.
- **The UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995:** where the term "gender mainstreaming" was introduced and subsequently used in several international conferences and high-level policies and declarations committed to merging gender equality efforts with sustainable water management.
- **The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development:** has re-emphasised the discussion by strengthening the connection between the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" and SDG 6, "Ensure access to water and sanitation for all".

These international agreements were translated to regional and national level policies in the water sector. Well-known strategies include the Nile Basin Initiative Gender Mainstreaming Policy and Strategy ([NBI, 2012](#)), the "African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW) Policy and Strategy for Mainstreaming Gender in Africa's Water Sector", ([AMCOW, 2011](#)) or the Mekong River Commission's (MRC) Gender Policy and Strategy ([MRC, 2013](#)). (MRC, All of these policies were followed by a rising number of manuals, guidelines, and case studies on gender and water issues ([Tools B5](#)) and specific gender indicators ([Tool B5.02](#)) that were developed to be able to track adherence to these targets.

Critical Aspects of Gender and Water Policies

Gender mainstreaming in water policies is only powerful if it is not limited to measures on paper. While some argue that taking small steps in an organisation instead of transforming its whole approach can be a slow revolution ([Davids, Van Driel, and Parren 2013](#)), there is a danger that the integration of gender policies will be reduced to trying to make women visible or simply including a gender element in a programme. Instead, achieving long term gender equality is about questioning how the main agenda benefits all genders equally and if underlying power systems are non-discriminatory.

Two critical aspects regarding gender policies in the water sector should be taken into account ([Van Koppen 2017](#)):

- **WASH Bias:** Gender and water policies continue to be biased towards the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector and water for domestic use. Without negating the importance of this, this focus can be to the detriment of the significance of gender in productive uses, including livestock, irrigation, or water resources management. It bears the risk of reinforcing women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work and failing to challenge men's supremacy in the "public" productive economy where they are having more access to and control over water and its infrastructure. This is especially important from an intersectional point of view and concerning poor rural areas.
- **Moving beyond the women as "victims" or "agents of change" dichotomy:**

Gender policies need to pay attention to the danger of portraying women as an isolated, special division deviating from men as the norm which do not need to be included. Women and men are both not homogenous groups and power relations intra and outside the household play a significant role. To guide real action, policies need to frame women beyond the two pillars of “victims” or “agents of change” so that complex hierarchies and discriminations can be addressed.

In terms of agricultural and economic growth, this must not be based on the exploitation of women's reproductive and productive labour in the water sector. In this sense, a gender policy has the potential both to promote gender mainstreaming efforts and to stimulate transformative processes towards gender equality and sustainable development.

Guidance for Developing a Gender Policy

Gender policies are relevant at all levels of water management and governance institutions. Ultimately, the success of policies and strategies fully depends on the environment in which they are implemented and the institutions and people who work to deliver them. To make a difference on the ground, policies require political commitment, cutting-edge thinking, technical know-how, strong and reliable sources of funding, and mechanisms of accountability ([Albuquerque and Roaf, 2012](#)).

The Gender and Water Alliance has developed a policy development manual to enable government, donor, or civil society organisations working on water management or service delivery to develop their own contextual gender policies. The step-by-step guide includes 7 phases ([GWA, 2003](#)):

- Step 1: Deciding on who takes responsibility
- Step 2: Situation analysis ([Tool B5.04](#), [Tool B5.05](#), and [Tool B5.06](#))
- Step 3: Review of situation analysis information
- Step 5: Developing the policy vision
- Step 6: Developing the policy commitments
- Step 7: Formulation of strategy or action plan

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