United Nations University
Institute for Water, Environment and Health

POLICYBRIEF
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Women in Africa's Water Leadership: Numbers Don't Lie

Executive Summary

- Across all 54 African countries, women's leadership footprint as heads of National Ministries responsible for managing water resources and sanitation is 17%, highlighting an extensive opportunity for increasing women's representation in water governance and leadership. On a sub-regional level, both West Africa and Southern Africa stand out as the top performers (20%), followed by North Africa (17%), East Africa (14%), and Central Africa (11%).

- Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within the selected top formal educational institutions offering water science and related fields across Africa. At the national level, only 11% of the selected government-owned institutions and 15% of the selected privately-owned institutions are led by women, averaging just 13% across all the institutions. At the sub-regional level, women's leadership representation follows this pattern: West Africa (20%) > North Africa (17%) > Southern Africa (10%) > East Africa (7%) > Central Africa (6%).

- Only one out of eleven transboundary water organizations in Africa is led by a woman. This reflects a missed opportunity for gender-inclusivity in water diplomacy, a key element toward achieving shared sustainability and equity goals.

- Women occupy only 9% to 24% of leadership roles across water sector domains in African economies, regardless of income level. In national ministries managing water resources and sanitation, female representation is highest in low-income countries (24%), compared to 15% in upper-middle-income and 10% in lower-middle-income economies.

Context

The higher you go, the fewer women there are,' says the Kenyan Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai. This quote properly captures the gender disparity in water governance globally, where women's representation diminishes at higher levels of decision-making. Since the Dublin principles, international policy agendas acknowledge the need for gender equality in water governance, defined as the framework and processes involved in making decisions and formulating and implementing policies related to the use and management of water resources, aiming to ensure the sustainable and equitable use of the natural resource. Yet, globally, women remain under-represented in decision-making roles and often appear to be strategically excluded from the governance structures that determine water policies and practices. This disconnect between the policy rhetoric endorsing gender inclusivity and the actual representation of women in practice is a worrying gap that inhibits progress toward sustainable and equitable water governance, especially in Africa. The first pivotal step in addressing this gender disparity is tackling the gender data gap.

Problem Statement

More than just an equity issue, leveraging the talents of women is essential in addressing the pressing challenges of water supply, quality, and climate change.[1] However, the underrepresentation of women in the water sector, particularly in leadership roles, persists despite policies promoting gender equality. Women comprise only 18% of the global water workforce and 23% of managerial positions, with even lower representation in developing nations.[2,3] This gender imbalance and the lack of gender-disaggregated data to monitor and track progress inhibit progress toward sustainable, inclusive, and equitable water governance. It is fundamental to accurately quantify women's representation to push for better inclusivity, a more balanced and fair opportunity for all, supported

by the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality. This policy brief by the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) is a step forward towards bridging this gap, providing a numerical assessment of the proportion of women who hold leadership positions (heads of organizations) across three water sector domains (national ministries, transboundary water organizations, and leading formal education institutions offering water science or related fields) with a focus on Africa.

Introduction

Water is fundamental to sustaining life and ecosystems. However, its governance is fraught with challenges that intertwine natural, social, and political dimensions. One significant issue is the unequal participation of women in decision-making and governance structures that determine water policies and practices.

Africa faces significant challenges in providing safe and reliable water services, despite the vast availability of natural water resources, such as the Congo (the second-largest river basin in the world, after the Amazon),[4,5] Nile, and the Niger river. Water scarcity remains a daily reality for millions, driven by uneven distribution, inadequate infrastructure, and institutional weaknesses.[6,7] The continent also lags behind in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on clean water and sanitation by 2030. As of 2022, more than half of the 703 million people lacking basic drinking water lived in sub-Saharan Africa[6,8], and according to the Global Water Security Outlook 2023, all countries in the region were rated as water insecure.[9]

Urban areas struggle with aging infrastructure and high levels of non-revenue water, while rural communities often depend on unsafe sources such as rivers and unprotected wells.[10] Climate change compounds these issues, with increasing droughts, erratic rainfall, and shrinking water bodies like Lake Chad, which has lost over 90% of its surface area since the 1960s, threatening both water availability and regional stability.[11] The increasing environmental degradation, rapid urbanization, population growth, and growing water consumption are straining already fragile human-nature systems.[12]

Institutional and governance challenges further hinder progress. Many countries lack clear water policies, adequate financing, and robust data systems to support effective decision-making. The African Development Bank estimates an annual investment gap of $43–56 billion in the water sector, with most nations allocating less than 0.5% of GDP to water-related infrastructure.[13]

Women's representation in leadership positions within Africa's water sector, as elsewhere, presents a complex intersection of gender dynamics, resource management, and sustainable development. Despite being primary stakeholders in water management at the household and community levels, their representation in formal decision-making roles remains disproportionately low across the continent.[14] This disparity not only reflects broader gender inequalities but also impacts the effectiveness of water governance systems throughout Africa. This underscores the urgent need to address gender disparities in water governance to improve overall water management and access.

The water sector, which includes national ministries, public and private utilities, regulatory bodies, education institutions responsible for water education, and policy-making institutions, has traditionally been male-dominated, mirroring patterns observed in other technical and infrastructure-related fields. Previous studies show that women occupy only 37% of the global water workforce and hold just 23% of managerial positions, which is lower than in other technical sectors like the energy sector.[15] A more recent assessment of 173 water sector organizations in the Global South highlighted 26% of women's footprint in leadership positions.[16] Several factors contribute to this disparity, including traditional gender roles, limited access to technical education, and persistent societal barriers. These barriers have been described as a "leadership ceiling" as even when women have the necessary qualifications, they face varied challenges in advancing to senior positions, such as gender bias, limited networking opportunities, and the absence of strong mentorship systems.[17] Additionally, subtle constraints like inflexible and non-inclusive employment practices or unwelcoming recruitment and promotion processes further hinder their progress.[1]

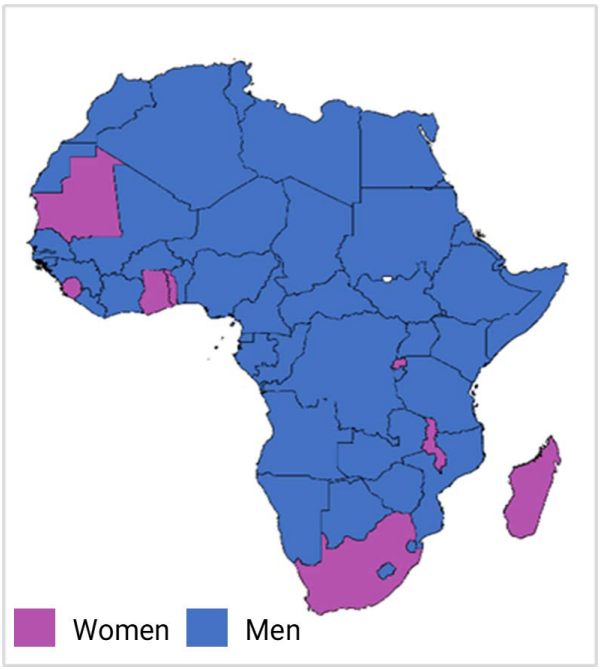


Figure 1: Women's leadership footprint in national ministries responsible for managing water resources and sanitation

Emerging evidence suggests that increasing women's representation in water sector leadership brings significant benefits. Studies across five African countries have shown that water utilities with higher female representation in management positions experience improved operational efficiency, better community engagement, and more effective implementation of gender-sensitive policies.[18] This indicates that integrating diverse perspectives has the potential to enhance decision-making processes and organizational performance.

Some African countries have recently implemented initiatives to address their gender imbalance. Kenya's Water Services Regulatory Board introduced gender mainstreaming guidelines requiring at least 33% female representation in water utility management boards.[19] Uganda's National Water and Sewerage Corporation has also established leadership development programs specifically targeting women professionals in the sector. These initiatives represent important steps toward achieving gender parity, though their long-term effectiveness remains to be fully evaluated. Also, the role of regional development partners has been crucial in promoting women's leadership in the sector. The African Development Bank's Water and Sanitation Department integrated gender equality objectives into its funding criteria, while organizations like the African Women in Water Network (AWWN) provide platforms for professional development and networking.[20] These interventions contribute to the gradual transformation in the sector leadership dynamics, though progress remains uneven across sub-regions and institutions.

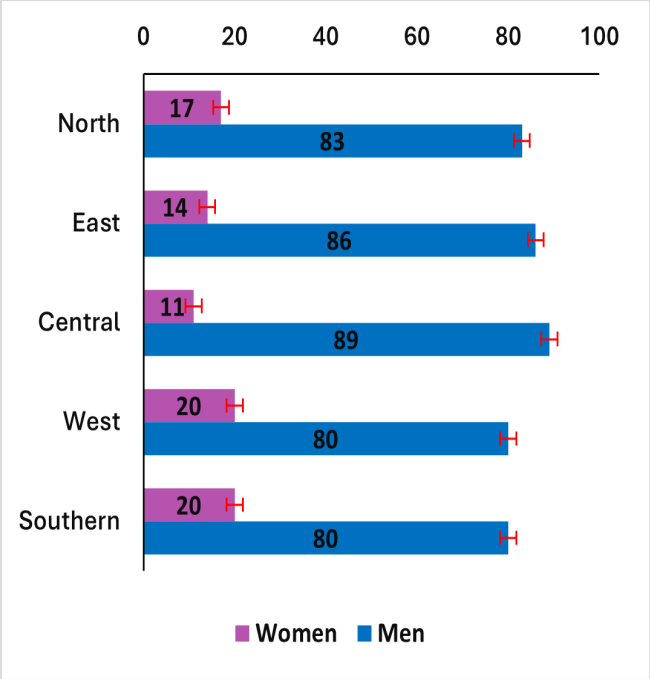


Figure 2: Gender gap in leadership positions in national ministries responsible for managing water resources and sanitation across the African sub-regions

This UNU-INWEH policy brief presents key findings on the current state of women's leadership footprint across three water sector domains in Africa, providing a sub-regional analysis and gender distribution outlook. By leveraging national and regional statistics, this policy brief aims to highlight the possible inequalities that currently exist and encourage a shift from merely being gender-aware or making paper-weight organizational commitments to actively taking action through deliberate organizational practices that move the numbers and advance progress toward gender equality.

Analysis

The underlying assumption of this analysis is that those who hold positions of authority provide a strong measure of the progress organizations are making in fostering equity in career advancement, decision-making, and power. The assessment is based on the principle that gender statistics can highlight the invaluable but often overlooked opportunity to address gender inequality and improve water governance. The analysis is focused on three key water sector domains: national ministries responsible for managing water resources and sanitation, formal education institutions responsible for water education, and transboundary water organizations. These domains stem from the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) toolkit for sex-disaggregated data,[21] which provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing gender representation in water-related sectors. Data were collected for all 54 African countries, focusing on the gender of individuals holding leadership or managerial positions within the selected domains.

For the national ministries, the gender of the appointed ministers of ministries responsible for managing the country's water resources and sanitation was extracted from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) database. This database provides up-to-date information on government officials across various countries. Given the diverse naming conventions of water-related national ministries across Africa, a systematic approach was adopted to identify the government bodies primarily responsible for water resource management, policy development, and implementation of water and sanitation programs. This approach follows the criteria outlined in the UNESCO WWAP Toolkit on Sex-disaggregated Water Data.[21] Ministries with titles explicitly including terms such as "Water," "Hydraulics," "Sanitation," or "Irrigation" were prioritized, as these indicate a direct mandate for water governance. In cases where multiple ministries addressed water-related issues, such as those in agriculture or environment, the ministry with the most direct responsibility was selected based on its title and inferred mandate, as defined by the toolkit. For example, Ghana's Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources was chosen over its Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology, and Innovation. In countries without

a dedicated water ministry, such as Guinea-Bissau or Rwanda, the Ministry of Environment was selected, reflecting the toolkit's emphasis on integrated water resource management under environmental governance.[21] Where ambiguity existed due to multiple water-related ministries, the one with the most specific focus on water resources and sanitation was prioritized, e.g., Côte d'Ivoire's Ministry of Hydraulics, Sanitation, and Health was selected over the Ministry of Water and Forests. To ensure accuracy, selected ministries were validated using reliable web sources such as the African Ministers' Council on Water,[22] confirming their roles in national water governance. This methodology aligns with the toolkit's emphasis on water governance, gender-responsive policies, and the UN SDGs.

For the formal education institutions, two leading universities (one government-owned and one privately-owned) offering water sciences or related fields were purposively selected for each country, as this may reflect the typical pattern of educational leadership in Africa. This selection was based on the universities' popularity and population size, determined using the Microsoft Co-Pilot large-language model (LLM). The gender of the heads of these institutions was extracted by exploring their respective websites. For transboundary water organizations, the gender of the heads of all river basin commissions operating within Africa was extracted from their respective websites. These organizations play a crucial role in managing water resources that span multiple countries across Africa.

The collected data were aggregated by sub-regions (North, West, Central, East, and Southern Africa) using both African Development Bank (AfDB) and African Union (AU) classifications. This sub-regional aggregation allowed for a comparative analysis, illustrating the gender gap in leadership roles within the water sector domains across different parts of the continent. The data were also further aggregated by income levels of African countries using the World Bank Income Classification[23] to check the possible influence of economic development on women's representation in leadership. This was based on the hypothesis that economic development may influence cultural norms and societal attitudes toward gender roles, potentially reducing gender biases and stereotypes that hinder women's participation in the water sector.

Income Level	National ministries responsible for water resources management and sanitation		Selected government-owned formal education institutions		Selected privately-owned formal education institutions	
	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)
Low Income	24	76	9	91	9	91
Lower-Middle Income	10	90	9	91	23	77
Upper-Middle Income	15	85	17	83	17	83

Figure 3: Women's representation in leadership roles across water sector domains in African economies

Key Findings

1. Across all 54 African countries, women's leadership footprint as heads of national ministries responsible for managing water resources and sanitation is 17%, highlighting an extensive opportunity for increasing women's representation in water governance and leadership. On a sub-regional level, both West Africa and Southern Africa stand out as the top performers (20%), followed by North Africa (17%), East Africa (14%), and Central Africa (11%).

2. Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within the selected top formal educational institutions offering water science and related fields across Africa. At the national level, only 11% of the selected government-owned institutions and 15% of the selected privately-owned institutions are led by women, averaging just 13% across all the selected institutions. At the sub-regional level, women's leadership representation follows this pattern: West Africa (20%) > North Africa (17%) > Southern Africa (10%) > East Africa (7%) > Central Africa (6%).

3. Only one out of eleven transboundary water organizations within the African region is led by a woman. This reflects a missed opportunity to fully utilize women's capacities and contributions to water diplomacy, a key element toward achieving shared sustainability and equity goals.

4. Women occupy only 9% to 24% of leadership roles across water sector domains in African economies, regardless of income level. In national ministries managing water resources and sanitation, female representation is highest in low-income countries (24%), compared to 15% in upper-middle-income and 10% in lower-middle-income economies.

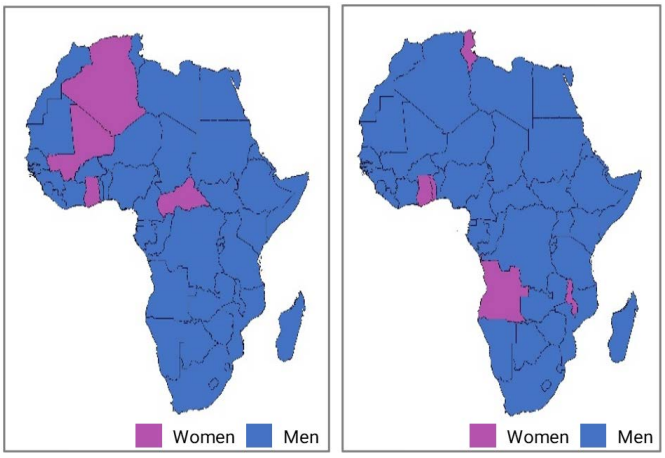


Figure 4: Women's leadership footprint in the selected top formal education institutions offering water sciences or related fields [a: Public Institutions; b: Private Institutions]

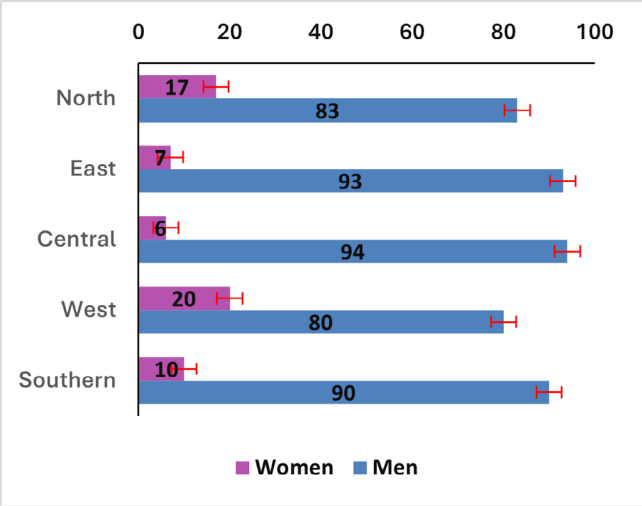


Figure 5: Gender gap in leadership positions in the selected leading formal water education institutions across the African sub-regions

Implications and Recommendations

The current state of women's representation in Africa's water resource management at the top leadership level reveals significant disparities that require urgent attention and systemic intervention.

At the national ministerial level, women hold only 17% of leadership positions, highlighting a persistent gender gap in high-level decision-making related to water management. Regional disparities are moderate: West and Southern Africa show relatively higher representation at 20%, while Central Africa lags behind at just 11%. These trends are echoed in the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) 2024 Report[24] on Women's Political Participation: Africa Barometer, which reveals similar patterns across other public sector institutions in Africa. West and Southern Africa's relatively higher representation (20%) may be attributed to more progressive gender policies and stronger institutional support for women's leadership development in countries like Senegal, Ghana, and South Africa.[25] The relatively low percentage of women leaders in Central African ministries responsible for water resource and sanitation management may point to deeply entrenched structural barriers that warrant closer examination and targeted intervention. In all, these observations might be reflective of the influence of varying cultural, political, and economic factors across African regions that prevent women from ascending to leadership positions.

Women's representation in leadership positions within the selected top water-related educational institutions in Africa averages just 13%, highlighting a significant gap in academic leadership. This underrepresentation may have a cascading effect on female student enrolment and retention in water-related fields.[26] The slight difference between government-owned institutions (11%) and privately-owned ones (15%) suggests that private institutions may offer more flexible policies for advancing women faculty into leadership roles. However, this modest gap warrants further investigation into the specific institutional contexts.

It is especially concerning that only one transboundary water organization in Africa is led by a woman, given the critical role these agencies play in regional water governance. Transboundary water issues are inherently complex, requiring strategic leadership that integrates socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions with the dynamics of natural water systems to ensure sustainable and equitable allocation among multiple users. Effective water diplomacy also demands strong negotiation and multi-stakeholder engagement skills, competencies that are gender-neutral but often shaped by gendered contexts.

The stark underrepresentation of women in leadership within African transboundary water agencies highlights a significant gender gap in a domain where inclusive leadership and dialogue are essential. This calls for a deeper investigation into the barriers affecting women's participation in water diplomacy, to inform policies that advance gender equity and improve the effectiveness of cross-border water management.[1]

Across the income levels in African economies (i.e., low-income to upper-middle income), women's representation in leadership roles ranges from 9% to 24%, reflecting the probable interplay between economic factors and gender equality. While higher income levels may generally correlate with better gender representation, this relationship is not linear.[27] The persistence of low representation, even in upper-middle-income economies, suggests that structural barriers (like cultural norms, lack of mentorship opportunities, and gender biases) may transcend economic development levels. As such, interventions should be targeted even in economically advanced contexts.

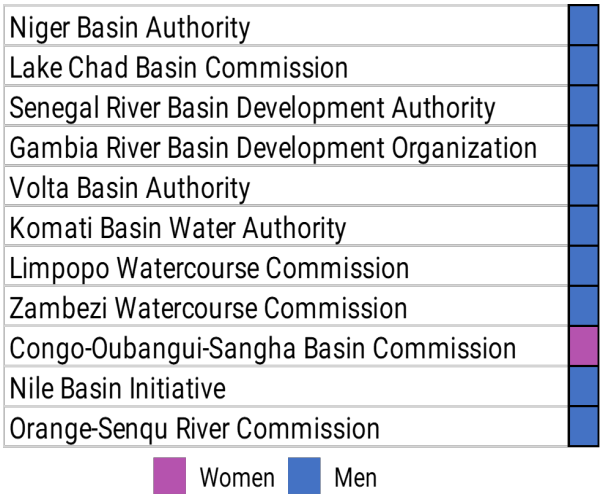


Figure 6: Women's leadership footprint in transboundary water organizations in Africa

Last, the methodology applied in this analysis recognizes data accessibility issues (relies only on publicly available data), potential selection bias from using a large language model, and the changing nature of leadership data over time. These factors limit the overall representativeness of women in the African water sector, suggesting the need for a more holistic approach in future research. However, these limitations do not change the main outcome of this assessment, which is strong and clear: the overall level of women's representation in the African water sector leadership is low.

Addressing this low representation is not only a matter of social justice but a strategic necessity for achieving efficient, inclusive, and sustainable water governance. Leveraging women's leadership capabilities is also essential in addressing the pressing challenges of water security and climate change across Africa. Achieving gender balance in water leadership requires a significant behavioural shift that necessitates challenging the conventional norm, given that leadership skills and qualities are inherently not tied to a specific gender. Men, in particular, can be the champions of change, acting differently to ensure individual and organizational practices, such as flexible, inclusive, and welcoming recruitment and promotion processes, including gender pay parity in comparable jobs/roles. Also, equitable educational access may be a key factor in ensuring that skilled women are better represented in the African water governance structure. Other specific actions to be implemented may include:

Target Gender Quotas with Transition Support

a. Implement a progressive quota system requiring a certain level of women representation, targeting qualified women in water sector leadership positions by a certain time.
b. Establish mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives specifically designed for women in mid-level management positions.
c. Create transition support mechanisms, including flexible work arrangements and childcare support to facilitate women's advancement to leadership roles.

Educational Pipeline Enhancement

a. Develop scholarship programs specifically targeting women pursuing advanced degrees in water resource management.
b. Create partnerships between educational institutions and water sector organizations to provide internship and apprenticeship opportunities for female students
c. Establish research grants prioritizing women-led research projects in water resource management.

Regional Harmonization and Knowledge Exchange

a. Strengthen the existing pan-African network of women leaders in water resource management to facilitate knowledge sharing and mentorship.
b. Implement cross-regional exchange programs to transfer successful practices from regions with higher levels of women leadership to those with lower levels.
c. Develop standardized gender mainstreaming guidelines for water sector organizations across all African regions.

Institutional Capacity Building

a. Implement gender transformative training for everyone in leadership positions within water sector organizations.
b. Establish transparent promotion criteria that eliminate implicit bias in leadership selection processes.
c. Create accountability mechanisms for tracking and reporting progress on gender representation goals.

Economic Empowerment and Resource Allocation

a. Integrate gender equality objectives into funding criteria as a financial mechanism for organizations to achieve gender representation targets.
b. Establish public-private partnerships focused on supporting women-led initiatives in water resource management.
c. Allocate specific budget lines for women's leadership development in water sector organizations.

Final Remark

Addressing gender disparity in the water sector workforce is crucial for achieving sustainable, inclusive, and equitable water governance. By implementing a range of transformative policies, organizations can work towards closing the gender gap, leveraging the full potential of women's contributions to the sector, and ultimately improving water management outcomes for all in Africa.

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