2024 VWI Gender Journey

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Equity in the Flow: Exploring Gender and Values in Water Decision-Making

The vision of the 2024 VWI Gender Journey is to explore how gender and values can shape outcomes of decision-making related to water and provide actionable recommendations for RVO.

Introduction

People's motivation and choices are closely tied to what they value. This has been shown to apply to water decision-making in its multiple dimensions (from households and hospitals to agriculture and catchment management to international treaties) as well as work relating to different ***genders*** (men, women, and non-binary people), including work towards gender equality. *Valuing water* has gained popularity among policymakers and academics as a new water management paradigm, yet there is limited clarity on how to put this paradigm into practice.[1] While the **Valuing Water Initiative** (VWI) promotes the High Level Panel for Water (HLPW) Principles for valuing water for incorporating values into water decision-making, practical application is still new and requires examining values through many additional stakeholders such as women, youth and grassroots and indigenous actors.

> "Any water governance issue, but especially conflicts around water governance can be interpreted as conflicts of values between different stakeholders" (Schulz et al., 2017)

The 2024 Gender Journey seeks to explore the interactions between values, water and ***gender*** to better understand their impacts on one another and what this can mean, particularly for implementing water projects with different stakeholders around the world. Recognizing a single project or organization cannot single-handedly tackle the systemic change needed to make water

[1] Schulz et al., 2024

decision-making more gender inclusive, the Gender Journey explored what can be done to support existing initiatives and new ones that seek to follow the HLPW's Valuing Water Principles, particularly around recognizing and embracing water's multiple values to different groups and interests in all decisions affecting water. Doing this work first requires a recognition and strengthening of water values associated with gender.

These key points above are articulated into the 2024 Gender Journey's three main objectives in Figure 1 below.

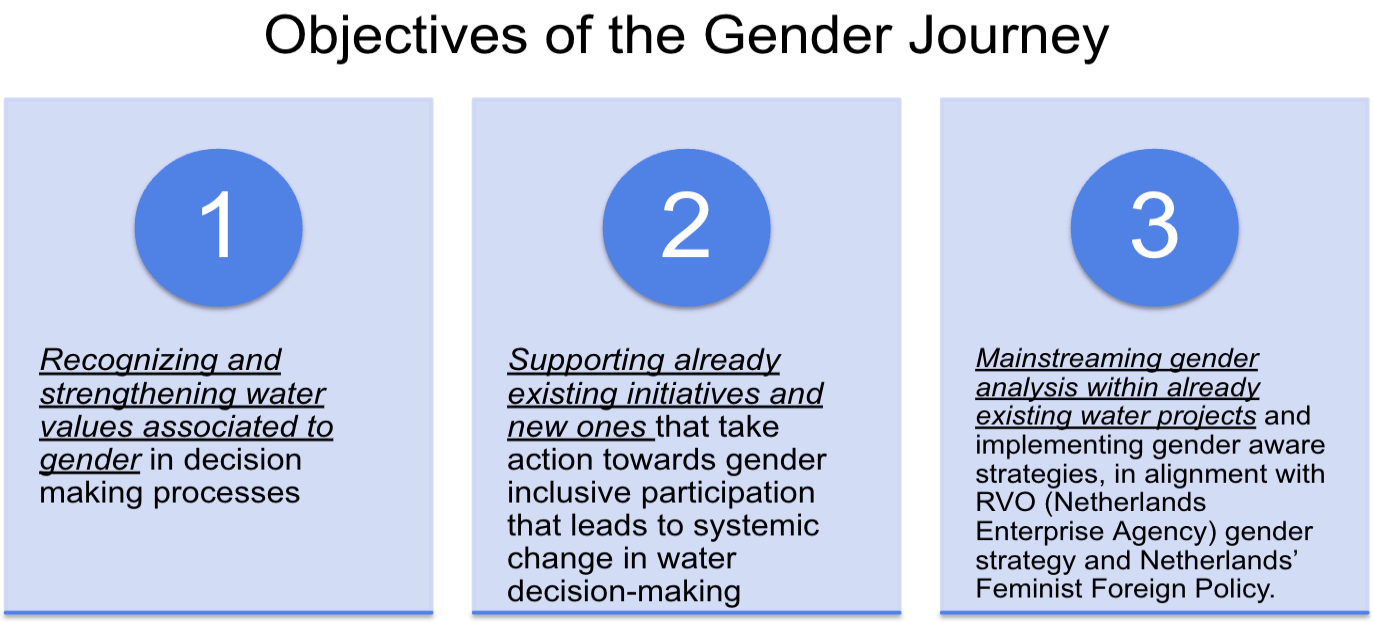
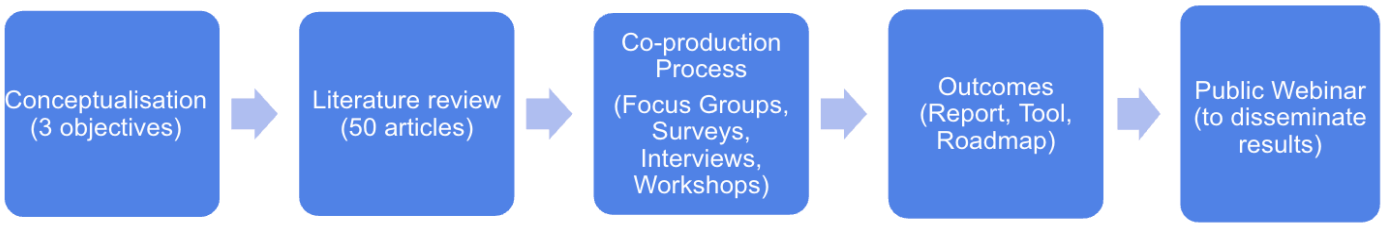


Figure 1: Objectives of the Gender Journey

The Process

The work under these objectives followed the process below which included **(1)** a Literature Review of 50 articles to get a state of the art understanding of what has been researched under gender and values in terms of their impact on water decision-making; **(2)** a co-production process involving a series of workshops, focus groups, and interviews with the Dutch Enterprise and Development Agency's Water and Climate Team and partners, within which the VWI is embedded; **(3)** outcomes synthesized into reports; and **(4)** a public webinar for disseminating the findings to a broad audience and for engaging in a conversation with key actors on the subject.



Linking Gender and Values for Water Decision-Making

Considering Values

What people value impacts the decisions they make both consciously and unconsciously. We know that different contexts and characteristics of people can give them varying insights, experiences, privileges or disadvantages. Conversely, people's experiences and privileges (or lack of) can impact what they value.

For example, the intrinsic value of water is separate from valuing water as a resource, a benefit, a service or an environmental good; instead it is about valuing water for itself, which is often related to spiritual or cultural valuing of water[2]. This form of valuing may or may not be part of the values held by institutions or other actors managing water resources or negotiating about the use and allocation of those resources.

Research around values and water has shown how values explain water management preferences. Through three archetypical preferences on water management, Schulz et al. (2024) show how these different types of values are held by water decision-makers or stakeholders despite the enormous diversity among water management contexts around the world. These preferences are **(1) *controlling*** water flows through engineering solutions; **(2) *managing*** water through market-based mechanisms; **(3) *working with*** natural water ecosystems. Other work has found that focusing on common values rather than the different needs or issues of stakeholders resulted in more comprehensive treaties and cooperative discussions.[3] **Considering values can help identify critical priorities for different stakeholder groups and thus tailor more equitable solutions that incorporate those values.**[4] Take into consideration the case study example on the Murray-Darling Basin in Australia that brings this point into clarity.

[2] Porta et al., 2021
[3] ibid.
[4] Schulz et al., 2017

Case Study: Murray-Darling Basin in Australia and applying values to water decision-making

When it comes to water resources, allocating water is often the key tension point: who gets the water? Like many transboundary basins, the Murray-Darling Basin had issues of who should get access to how much water. This came to a crisis during the long drought Australia had between 2001 and 2009 when the Lower Lakes dropped to record lows exposting acid sulfate soils and increasing salinity six-fold.
In 2008, a focus on sustainability and the environment became paramount compared to past agreements for the Murray-Darling Basin covering the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. This sustainability component included considering climate change impacts to future sustainability, a water quality and salinity management plan, and average long-term sustainable diversion limits for the amount of water (both groundwater and surface water) that could be taken from the Basin. This shift created a values baseline for first "giving back" an amount of water to the environment for sustainability; later a second initial layer of water for critical human needs was added. Only after these basic needs had been addressed could allocations for economic (largely agriculture) and other purposes begin. Not all stakeholders thought sustainability should be the predominant value but adding this value changed all the MDBA conversation and focus for the new agreement.

Incorporating Gender Values

Why does gender matter?

Gender needs a targeted focus because of the unique, pervasive, and deeply-rooted nature of gender-based inequalities. Gender is a category that includes men, women and non-binary people; it is about looking at the different privileges and inequalities across gender groups.

For instance, women are approximately 50% of the population, yet they are less than 20% of water (and sanitation) sector workers globally. This means their voices are not automatically or equally heard within the sector.

According to the World Bank Equal Aqua platform's research, women on average consist: 21% of water utility workers, 22% of water utilities' engineers, and 24% of water utilities' managers. While this is a tiny part of the whole picture and does not account for those working on water governance such as transboundary issues or in other non-utility positions, it still gives clear information on the underrepresentation of women in water management.

Many previous attempts at including gender equality in decision-making have not been as successful. For instance, research has pointed to the fact that even when women's participation is mandatory, they are physically present but often not listened to.[5] Other findings are listed and elaborated on in

[5] Caretta et al., 2015; Hannah et al., 2021; Imburgia et al., 2020

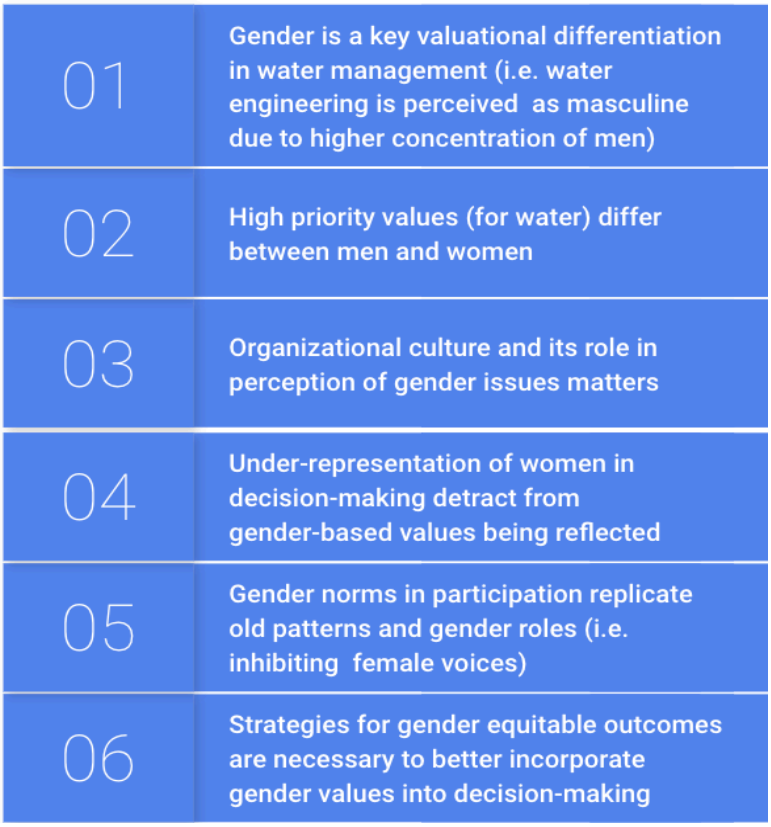
the next section below.

Additionally when considering gender, it is important to recognize that a person cannot be reduced to a single attribute; meaning, gender is not isolated and exists within social contexts. Someone's economic status, ethnicity, age, and educational level all impact their values, but also how they are perceived and included (or not) in decisions and projects (what is referred to as ***intersectionality***). Discrimination based on people's gender does not act in a vacuum; it changes depending on these other factors to create nuanced situations and outcomes. For instance, not all men or all women will be treated the same during a consultation process. When exploring the impacts and realities of gender in decision-making, it is critical to also examine intersectionality.

What are the persistent challenges in incorporating gender values in water decision-making?

Below we expand on key findings synthesized in Table 1, to offer more nuance on the specific challenges that persist in incorporating gender values and in decision making on water.

We reviewed 50 academic articles that look at "gender", "water", "values" and "decision-making/ governance" as a keyword combination. **We observed a distinction in the literature, as some focused on how different genders valued water differently, and others focused on how to better include equal gender balance in decision-making on water.** This resulted in distinguishing two key categories:



1. ***gender-based values:*** how for instance women (can) value water differently from men.

2. ***gender-equity values:*** how organizations and decision-making spaces (can) value not only gender equality but also equity.

Note on limitation: most research focused on interpreting gender inequality by focusing on women as a gender group. We

note there is limited to no research conducted on non-binary or LGBTQ+ groups in relation to their values and inclusion in decision-making on water, and recommend this consideration for future research.

01– Gender is a key *valuational* differentiation in water management

Gender perceptions impact how water management (including transboundary water) is perceived and what types of knowledge (and profiles of those who represent this knowledge) are valued. For example, research has demonstrated how water management has included predominantly a male engineering gaze, and is perceived as masculine. This has led to hiring more men on technical water projects which reinforces gender biases and increases exclusion of women in the water management field.

> The dominance of men in transboundary water governance is often seen as the norm and goes unquestioned. This is especially true in water diplomacy, where both diplomacy and water resource management converge, both being fields traditionally masculinized. Masculinity in these professions is not just about the majority of men holding positions, but also about how professional standards and values are shaped by gendered ideas. Terms used to define and evaluate what it means to be a successful water diplomat are often linked to traits typically associated with men. (Sehring, ter Horst, and Zwarteveen, 2022)

02– Men and women tend to have different priorities, needs and values when it comes to water

For instance, women prefer to have domestic water supply and irrigation structures close to their households. This allows them to effectively divide their time between productive and domestic responsibilities. Men are usually more mobile, so the location of supply is less important to them. This is contextual and often intersects with cultural norms, economic conditions and gender roles. It is important to pay attention to such nuances in implementing water projects, and in including the priorities (and values) of different genders into the design of the project, as well as into the beneficiaries of the project (i.e who has access to water? how is it allocated? etc.).

> In the Chhattis Mauja irrigation system in Nepal, Zwarteveen (1997) found that men and women, though working together as co-farmers, had different water priorities. Men focused on early-season water for land preparation, while women emphasized consistent water flow to prevent weed growth in rice paddies. These

differences highlight how gender considerations shape data collection, model calibration, and reporting in water management (Packett et al., 2020).

03– Organizational culture plays a role in prioritizing (or not) a gender focus

People who work in an organization create formal and informal relationships that impact their awareness of gender problems and how they choose to handle (or not address) these in their day-to-day activities and on projects. This is known as organizational culture. Addressing gender biases inside an organization may enhance the integration of gender equality ideals across water projects, from team formation and design to stakeholder engagement procedures and final execution and assessment.

Schmidt (2023) points out that gender considerations have often reduced women's roles in relation to water to simplistic stereotypes, failing to address deeper issues like unequal water rights and biased methods of measuring water usage that disadvantage women. This can be attributed to the level of awareness and/or commitment of a team working on, or researching a project within a community or context on how well to understand and incorporate gender dimensions, from values, to needs, to structural inequalities. Other research on this topic is covered in the work of Zwarteveen and Meinzen-Dick (2001); Mehta et al. (2014); Lahiri-Dutt (2015); Wilder and Ingram (2018) among others, warning against simplistic stereotyping or tokenism (ticking a box for gender representation without meaningful participation).

04– Under-representation of women in decision-making

Results indicate that women have been underrepresented in River Basin Organisations (RBOs) and Water User Associations (WUAs) as a whole and in other positions of decision-making power. This is due to not inviting or including women in an equitable manner. This body of research recommends that gender-based values *should* be reflected through the equal and **equitable*** representation of women (*a step beyond only equality, by removing barriers to achieve equal power status) in these decision-making spaces.

Although water quality issues significantly affect women, especially Aboriginal women, their perspectives and experiences are rarely included in discussions or policy-making. While Aboriginal women may "speak for the water" in certain ceremonies, they are often excluded from speaking about water in other policy contexts (McGregor, 2008, cited in Anderson, Clow, and Haworth-Brockman, 2013).

05– Gender norms impact participation in community-based governance

On balanced gender participation, findings contradict the notion that community-based governance of water leads to equitable participation and empowerment of women. Research has shown that Water User Associations (WUAs) do not guarantee equitable gender participation depending on the norms (cultural or organizational) and the policies in place. There are other factors involved in this lack or lower participation of women. These include that women are not compensated for their time away from chores or other work, when they are often more economically disadvantaged than men. Sometimes women are deterred from participating because they feel their voices will not be heard. Attention must be paid to these dynamics in decision-making spaces if true equal gender participation is to be achieved.

Even when enforced by law, gender-responsive participation initiatives often result in tokenistic involvement of women (Caretta et al., 2015; Hannah et al., 2021; Imburgia et al., 2020). These efforts can also increase women's workload and may worsen existing inequalities, leaving women in disadvantaged roles (Masanyiwa et al., 2015). Marginalized groups, such as women and lower-caste individuals, often opt out of participation due to their limited influence, as seen in rural Rajasthan, where lower-caste women on village water committees felt they held little power (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; O'Reilly & Dhanju, 2014, cited in Dickin & Caretta, 2022).

06– Strategies for gender equitable outcomes work, yet alone are not enough

Research shows that where strategies focused on gender equality (and more importantly focused on equity) are in place, there are better results in designing solutions to water challenges that are inclusive of different gender values and needs (and that do not exclude certain gender groups). For example, Kenyan public policy has institutionalized various measures to reduce gender inequality, a major strategy being to limit the representation of either men or women to two-thirds in any governance arrangement. Such policies are effective as a first step, but not enough without reinforcement and awareness-raising/ capacity building for diverse gender groups to support in achieving this gender inclusion and equality.

Gender Impact Assessments (GIAs) can shed light on access to and control over water resources, as well as the potential effects of projects (Simon, 2013). However, these analyses are often constrained by insufficient data (Adams, 2000; Escobar et al., 2017; Ray, 2007, cited in Packett et al., 2020). To address this, designing “uncertainty, risk, and vulnerability assessments” can help to confront our lack of knowledge about gender issues and explore their possible repercussions, as well as develop additional support for strategies aiming to achieve gender equitable outcomes (Packett et al., 2020).

Recommendations for applying learnings in practice

As noted earlier, a key distinction observed in the literature findings is that some research focused on how different genders valued water differently, and others focused on how to better include equal and equitable gender balance in decision-making on water. This led to conceptualizing the two categories mentioned earlier for understanding and incorporating gender and values in decision-making on water as follows:

Gender value type	Example
gender-based values: how a person's gender may affect how they value water.	Women tend to be more focused on the water source being healthy to drink for their families, while men might be more focused on the amount of water for crops and livestock that will be sold at the market. Here, based on context, women and men value water differently. To incorporate gender into water decision-making, both of these components must be considered.
gender equity values: how gender is valued in decision-making on water.	Understanding if and how gender equality or equity is valued on projects is important in organizations and in decision-making, to ensure that different genders are given equal weight and representation in the decision-making process.

In addition to the outputs from reviewing academic literature, it was important that the Gender Journey also considered ***lived experiences*** and insights from those trying to apply gender and values to water decision-making. For a broad viewpoint, the Journey held conversations with transboundary practitioners as part of the Women in Water Diplomacy Network's Global Forum in March 2024, which had participants from over 40 countries. For a more targeted view of donor policy implementation, it conducted in-depth discussions with a range of experts working at or linked to the RVO, a survey with the RVO Water and Climate team, and held sessions about gender, values and water decision-making for the RVO team and the wider VWI workshop in late June 2024. This range of insights produced some key findings that align with the academic research to provide a series of recommendations that could be initial steps towards more integration of gender, values and water decision-making.

01- Practitioner agreement on gender-based values as a valuable category

During the Gender Journey events, the concept of how different gender groups (predominantly women and men) value water differently came up repeatedly in practitioner circles, in alignment with findings from academic literature. These differences came from both an intrinsic valuing of water and also from different uses of water. What was out of the scope of this report was to

investigate whether these values are based on cultural norms around different gender groups or if they are somehow inherent and related to biological sex. It is nonetheless important to call out that to date, much focus has been placed on gender equity values, in attempts to include more women in representation roles in decision-making on water, and not so much on gender-based values.

> ***Recommendation 01:*** This report invites practitioners to pay closer attention to gender-based values - investigating and considering how women and men may value water differently in specific contexts or projects, and to bring in these "other ways of valuing" to an equal consideration in the design, data gathering, modeling… and reporting.

02- Lack of expertise on gender as a barrier

Better incorporating gender aware and gender transformative approaches have become popular topics among development projects in recent years, but have not been supported with strong capacity building on the topic for practitioners at either the policy or implementation levels. The Gender Journey activities revealed a common concern among practitioners that without formal capacity building or training on gender, attempts to include gender might actually cause long-term harm or little change. Lack of understanding around how to consider gender in various contexts also makes it difficult to raise the need to include gender values (either gender-equity or gender-based values) with others working on projects–whether implementing partners or local communities. Those with greater experience on the topic articulated the concern of a simple box-ticking exercise when gender is "added" to a project as well as a lack of appreciation by some (including donors) of the long-term, slowly built partnerships that are needed to make significant change.

> ***Recommendation 02:*** More resources should be directed to training staff working on all aspects of water management and governance, including policy implementation. This training should include understanding of the range of terminology used to be able to understand available resources that use this terminology, and also how to practically consider and incorporate gender, how to conduct gender analysis, and how to conduct gender impact assessments on projects.

03- How to change values

Practitioners agreed advancing gender equity and incorporating more women in water decision-making requires understanding and valuing gender equity. "How do we make that happen? How can we change what people value?" This theme goes back to the question around whether or not gender equity is a priority value. The research shows that this is not just about values held by individuals, but also that organizational culture, built on values, plays a key role. Organizational change is its own knowledge area and worth pulling on when considering how to change values around water and gender. The academic research also signaled that gender equality does not happen by only advocating for it but through a wider range of actions.

Recommendation 03: When working on water-related projects or water decision-making, efforts need to be made to ensure that stakeholder consultations and decision-making involves a range of different gender groups and is set up in such a way that those different groups are able to share their concerns freely, feel heard and that their concerns, priorities and values are equally acknowledged in the decision-making process.

04- Layering of circumstances and identities

Often people discussing gender are speaking about it as embedded and interconnected with different subsets in a gender group, at times without being aware. When talking about prioritizing gender, they are often wanting to prioritize access for a specific sub-gender group (i.e women farmers, or women in poor households). Not enough is done at the outset of conversations and events to outline how categories are being defined (sometimes people are talking about people's biological sex (male or female at birth) instead of people's genders (the gender roles they perform in society: man, woman or non-binary) and what the conversation will focus on. This practical finding is another way of expressing the academic focus on ***intersectionality*** *(the intersection of multiple identities)*. In many water decision-making forums, the discussion on women and water does not distinguish between women who are the users of water resources and those who might be working professionally in the sector even though the latter are, theoretically, easier to bring into decision-making and the former might have a wider range of insights.

Recommendation 04: In working towards gender equity and/or incorporating a range of gender voices for a particular topic or event, it is critical to be mindful and clearly articulate what aspects of gender and other identities are being incorporated at any given step or situation. If clearly leaving a group out that might be relevant, consideration should be given to how to incorporate that group's insights in another way.

Linking the Gender Journey findings to the Valuing Water Principles

The Valuing Water Principles

Whatever role we have in working with water, we have a duty to:

1. Recognize and embrace water's multiple values–to different groups and interests in all decisions affecting water.
2. Reconcile values and build trust--Conduct all processes to reconcile values in ways that are equitable, transparent and inclusive
3. Protect the sources--Watersheds, rivers, aquifers, associated ecosystems, and used water flows for current and future generations.
4. Educate to empower–Promote education and awareness among all stakeholders about the intrinsic value of water and its essential role in all aspects of life.

5. Invest and innovate–Ensure adequate investment in institutions, infrastructure, information, and innovation to realize the many benefits derived from water and reduce risks.

The Gender Journey engaged all five VWI principles with the following insights for better incorporating gender values into decision-making on water.

Recognize and embrace water's multiple values: Research reinforced the concept that water is valued differently by different gender groups. Yet, acknowledging and incorporating the ways different gender groups value water and prioritizing marginalized groups' ways of valuing water into decision-making requires more attention and strategy.

Recognize values and build trust: Depending on context, women value water differently from men and are often more focused on its essential role for life and different aspects of community health than men focus on. The voices of other gender groups are not as empowered as men's voices in many parts of the world. In some cases, these other groups may not trust current decision-making mechanisms to have their interests at heart. Trust can be built through empowering other voices and values at the table via meaningful participation and not mere tokenism. Meaningful participation requires more work and more intentionality, but the trust it creates is priceless.

Protect the sources: Research shows that women tend to place a higher value on environmental protection than men; thus strengthening this principle should include ensuring women's participation in water-related decision-making.

Educate to empower: There is work to be done within this principle because men remain the predominant gender group with decision-making authority in most water management situations globally. A focus on empowering women about how to navigate male dominated water decision-making spaces is necessary. Incorporating women and other non-dominant gender groups into water decision-making could also educate current decision-makers about water's range of intrinsic values and empower men to make more informed and inclusive decisions.

Invest and innovate: Water cannot be sustainably managed if decision-makers do not fully understand how water is used and valued within communities. This incomplete picture hides unknown risks and can damage otherwise well-intended and ambitious efforts for sustainability. Investment decisions need to include different gender groups in culturally appropriate ways that allow for these hidden risks to be addressed and for sustainable, just and inclusive solutions to be realized.

Glossary

While this report tries to reduce the amount of gender jargon included, this glossary has been added to help those who want to use or reference the more common gender-related terminology.

1. Gender blind--has no gender-related focus. Such a project does not consider cultural, economic, social and political roles between women and men.

2. Gender aware--takes into account the different positions of women and men, but make no changes to the underlying causes of those differences.

3. Gender transformative--actively works to change the underlying issues that cause or perpetuate gender inequality in the project area.

4. Gendered lens--consciously considering the impact your intervention will have on women.

5. Gender mainstreaming--to make the concerns and experiences of women and men an integral part of the design, the implementation and the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes of projects and programs.

6. Intersectional lens--considering critically multiple factors simultaneously, i.e. not just looking at gender but also other factors such as age, economic status, education level, etc.

7. Gender-based values–values that may be held by different gender groups.

8. Gender-equity values–those values promoting gender equity and considering intersectionality.

9. Gender-oriented values—those values promoting gender equity and considering intersectionality, and those that may be held by different gender groups (gender-based). May include (but are not limited to): inclusivity, equity, safety and security, empowerment, relationality, etc.

10. Values Approach (to water)–an approach that serves to identify the different kinds of values held by water users, managers, citizens, and stakeholders in a given geographical context and that may help to better understand water management options, conflicts about water, and pathways for their resolution.

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