



Learning Event Summary

March 5, 2026

Women Leaders in Transboundary Water
Governance: The Experience from Ethiopia

Meeting Report

Women Leaders in Transboundary Water Governance: The Experience from Ethiopia

On March 5, CIWA's Male Champions for Women's Empowerment (MCWE) hosted a learning webinar to explore how Ethiopia's Ministry of Water and Energy integrates a gender-transformative approach to promote equality and women's leadership. Dereje Gebremichael, a Male Champion who joined when MCWE was launched in 2023, played a key role to help organize the event which brought together 76 participants from across Africa. Participants included staff from the Ministry of Water and Energy; members of the Ethiopian Nile Discourse Forum; CIWA's Male Champions, water diplomacy practitioners and negotiators; representatives from basin organizations and transboundary water institutions; civil society organizations, NGOs, and women's networks; researchers, academics, and students; donors, development partners, and international organizations.

Set up to be an interactive event, participants learned about and shared perspectives about challenges and opportunities for women in transboundary water management, heard about achievements and future ambitions of women leaders, and discussed strategies to engage more women professionals. They also considered the vital role men can play as allies to advance gender equality and empower women in the water and energy sector including recommending steps men can take as allies and champions.

Beleyou Tekola, Executive Officer for Transboundary and Transboundary Water Management, began with the keynote speaker and Aynalem Ashebir, Executive Director – Agri Service Ethiopia and Board Chairperson, followed up with a five-minute pitch. Both presentations laid the foundation for small group discussions that followed the plenary session.

Challenges in the transboundary water sector

Both presenters spoke about challenges women continue to face including a low representation of women in engineering, limited access to field assignments and institutional biases as women struggle to find a work-life balance. Aynalem Ashebir noted:



“The problem is that engineering, hydrology, and international relations are fields that are traditionally male-dominated and shape transboundary water governance.”

Aynalem Ashebir,
Executive Director, Agri Service Ethiopia, Chair of the Ethiopia Nile Basin Discourse Forum

As a result, she noted that men are overrepresented in senior leadership and technical decision-making roles. Women remain largely excluded from leadership in transboundary water governance with less than 20% of women in high-level leadership positions. Major international instruments remain gender blind. Transboundary agreements often overlook social impacts. “This results in transboundary agreements that prioritize hydropower, irrigation, and state interests, while overlooking social impacts—especially on women, who are often responsible for household water, food security, and health.”

Benefits of Women's Participation

Both speakers reminded participants that women are central to water use management and resilience because they bring diverse perspectives and a better balance between social and environmental considerations. They tend to be stronger when it comes to cooperation and conflict prevention. They also demonstrate more collaborative negotiation styles. Tekola emphasized: "When women lead, cooperation deepens, institutions strengthen, conflicts decline, and outcomes improve—for people, for ecosystems, and for future generations. Therefore, supporting women's leadership in transboundary water governance, or in any other field, is not optional. It is essential for a sustainable, peaceful, and just future." Ashebir highlighted how women's leadership can contribute to improving broader issues affecting local and global populations:



"Women's leadership will improve water security and human development. Because women manage water at the household level, their leadership aligns policies with public health, food security and climate resilience. This strengthens adaptation to floods, droughts, and climate uncertainty."

Beleyo Tekola,
Executive Officer for Transboundary and Transboundary Water Management,
Ministry of Water and Energy of Ethiopia

Men as Allies

Drawing attention to the key role that men can play as allies to support women's empowerment by supporting women's leadership in transboundary water management Beyolou Tekola said: "Gender transformation cannot be achieved by women alone. We need men in leadership positions to open the space for women, to challenge biases against women, to support work-life balance and to mentor young professionals." She has observed concrete changes in overcoming gender inequalities within her own Ministry has been able to benefit from the support of men.

Opportunities and Progress

Both expressed optimism about the increasing recognition of women's analytical skills, stronger institutional support and a growing network of women. The emergence of a cadre of female leaders has started to influence outcomes, build bridges and mentor the next generation of female leaders. This has led to an increasing emphasis on gender equality in the transboundary sphere. Tekola noted: "Support from initiatives like the Male Champions for Women's Empowerment are critical as are regional and international platforms that are emerging to support gender equality. There is also a growing recognition that future water diplomacy must be inclusive." Despite progress made Tekola emphasized: "We have a responsibility to mentor, sponsor and create opportunities for other women to grow." She also noted: "There is a strategic necessity to have women's participation to enhance institutional effect."

Reflecting upon her own career, Aynalem Ashebir emphasized the need to speed up the process to achieve gender equality in the transboundary sphere: "It took me 35 years to reach the top level. It is exhausting and a waste of time. We need to do something so that women today do not have to wait so long." She therefore called for a diversity of actions. This includes challenging masculinized norms, creating inclusive institutional and equitable promotion pathways, establishing gender-sensitive legal frameworks and strategies, collecting sex-disaggregated data and tracking impacts and institutionalizing gender equality through clear mandates and accountability mechanisms. She concluded by stating: "To address the challenges of transboundary water governance, we must start with the people most affected—women."

Small Group Sessions

Small Group Session one:

Challenges and opportunities for women in the transboundary water sector

Facilitator: Ellen Hagerman Note-taker: Albain Tchangou

During the small group session, Gulzhan Makhmudova reflected on the plenary presentation by sharing that the situation in Ethiopia is similar to her native Kurdistan. She noted that women are not choosing to work in the water sector due to technical and institutional barriers such as a lack of maternity leave, limited access to education, and cultural norms that limit participation of women.



“Water has a male face. Water-related activities require a high level of education which can be a challenge for women.”

Gulzhan Makhmudova,
UNDP Kyrgyzstan, Women in Water Diplomacy Network Global Leadership Council member

The group noted additional challenges. This included limitations in terms of water sector education which offers only a limited number of courses at the university level for women to attend. The group agreed that cultural barriers and social norms continue to impede women’s advancement in transboundary water management. They also felt that women’s representation is not enough with a clear need for women’s voices to be actively incorporated into decision-making processes.

The group noted additional opportunities that build upon what was put forward during the plenary presentations. This includes identifying ways to promote more young women professionals in the water sector. This needs to go hand in hand with building a stronger case for women’s empowerment at social, economic and education levels. Decision makers need to be involved at multiple levels not only at the top. Efforts also need to be taken to avoid the silo mentality by engaging men and women as joint collaborators to address gender inequalities. Addressing underlining issues while ensuring that grassroots communities should remain a key focus of empowerment. The group agreed that the organization of more events like this learning event are critical and recommended organizing a regular webinar with women in Africa and Central Asia to facilitate the sharing of experiences and enable joint learning.

Small Group Session two:

Strategies to engage more women professionals in transboundary water management

Facilitator: Enock Kiminta Note-taker: Donald Kasongi

Strategies

The group put forward a diversity of strategies to tackle the challenges they heard about during the plenary presentation. At the workplace level, they noted the need to ensure that facilities at events accommodate women noting that toilets are not balanced meaning that women lack time for networking. There is also a need to break institutional frameworks that prevent women from

climbing up the institutional ladder and create mechanisms within the workplace such as complaint mechanisms. Education was identified as a critical area for interventions including the need to find ways to encourage the involvement of young girls in STEM and to promote women's learning including through peer learning as a priority at the community and institutional level. In terms of participation, discussions need to go down to the local level while noting that technology can be a challenge. There is also a need to leverage political participation. It will be important to consult women leaders so they can share their experiences. In keeping with the adoption of a transformative approach, the group called for an examination of how to influence and change gender norms such as examining ways to change the role of care among women as a huge barrier. They also recommended scaling up the role of Male Champions.

Small Group Session three:

How to foster male allyship in the transboundary water sector

Facilitator: Lawrence Ndere **Note-taker:** Dereje Gebremichael

This group identified ways to foster male allyship. Building positive masculinity was emphasized. They therefore recommended providing coaching and mentoring on the role they can play to promote gender equality as men leaders. This could include providing emotional support without judgment. The group felt that men need to learn about the importance of respecting women's autonomy by respecting their decisions and supporting them. The momentum to foster male engagement requires undertaking continuous awareness creation and advocacy on gender equality including highlighting the role men can play to create a positive work environment. It also requires assigning a role and encouraging commitments for male leaders to support women in leadership. The group also concluded that engaging more male champions can positively affect work environments.

The meeting ended with closing remarks by Ambassador Asfau Dingamo, State Minister for Water and Energy of Ethiopia. He highlighted that the Ministry is working to make gender a key aspect. He reinforced that Ethiopia is taking critical steps to move towards a transformative approach to gender equality.

Online Event

WOMEN LEADERS IN TRANSBOUNDARY WATER GOVERNANCE

The Experience from Ethiopia

Wednesday, March 5, 2026

16:00–17:30 East Africa Time

Zoom Link: wrl.d.bg/c/WNV5OYIUk8

Open Registration!
Open to externals – Follow the link to sign up for free!

Logos: CIWA, MALE CHAMPIONS FOR WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT, WORLD BANK GROUP

Speakers: Four individuals, including a woman in a hard hat and a man in a suit.

Conclusion

The discussions throughout this learning event underscored a central message: advancing gender equality in transboundary water governance is both an urgent necessity and a strategic investment. The insights shared by speakers and participants highlighted not only the persistent barriers women face but also the transformative impact women leaders already have in building cooperation, strengthening institutions, and driving resilience across communities and ecosystems. The experience from Ethiopia demonstrates that when institutions commit to gender-transformative approaches—supported by both women leaders and engaged male allies—progress becomes visible, sustainable, and systemic.

At the same time, the exchanges reaffirmed that achieving equality requires continuous effort: dismantling structural barriers, shifting social norms, diversifying leadership pathways, and ensuring that women's voices inform policies and decisions at all levels. The strategies put forward across the breakout groups—strengthening education and mentorship, promoting male allyship, institutionalizing accountability, and creating more inclusive spaces—offer a practical roadmap for change.

Call to Action

As we move forward, participants and partners are encouraged to:

1. **Champion gender-transformative approaches** within their institutions by integrating gender equality into policies, programs, and decision-making processes.
2. **Mentor and sponsor young women professionals**, helping them access opportunities, field experience, and leadership pathways in water and energy sectors.
3. **Engage men as allies**, encouraging men in leadership roles to actively open space for women, challenge stereotypes, and support inclusive work environments.
4. **Invest in education and training**, especially for girls and young women in STEM and water-related fields, and promote peer learning across regions.
5. **Strengthen regional and international collaboration**, including through regular knowledge sharing events that bring together women leaders, practitioners, and Male Champions across Africa, Central Asia, and beyond.
6. **Institutionalize accountability** by collecting sex-disaggregated data, tracking progress, and embedding gender equality mandates across transboundary water institutions.
7. **Elevate women's voices** in all transboundary water dialogues, ensuring they shape the policies that affect their communities and livelihoods.
8. **Make work places gender-friendly** through practical measures such as breastfeeding stations, childcare support, adequate sanitation facilities, and policies that support caregiving responsibilities.

Together, these actions can accelerate the pace of change and ensure that women no longer wait decades to occupy the leadership positions they deserve. Building inclusive, resilient, and peaceful transboundary water cooperation depends on the full participation and leadership of women—and on collective commitment from all of us to make this a reality.



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