



MALE CHAMPIONS
FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT



Questions and Answers

Male Champions for Women's Empowerment in
Transboundary Water Management in Sub-Saharan Africa

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This Questions and Answers note has been prepared to assist CIWA's Male Champions in better understanding and assuming their roles as part of Male Champions for Women’s Empowerment. The note begins by providing background information about the Cooperation in International Waters in Africa (CIWA) generally followed by specific details regarding its role and commitment to gender equality and social inclusion. It then provides contextual details about how gender inequalities manifest within the water sector at the programmatic and institutional levels. This is followed by some key definitions to better situate the context. Finally, it concludes by providing details about the Male Champions for Women’s Empowerment ranging from its mandate to articulating what actions have been identified and taken as well as challenges that have been identified to date.

Questions and Answers

Background

What is the mandate of CIWA?

The Cooperation in International Waters in Africa (CIWA) is a World Bank Trust Fund that facilitates transboundary cooperation on the management of shared water bodies within sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Since 2011, CIWA has supported riparian governments in Sub-Saharan Africa to fuel sustainable, inclusive, climate-resilient growth by addressing constraints to cooperative management and development of transboundary waters. To do so, CIWA makes investments to develop water infrastructure and offers technical support and analyses to create a better understanding of transboundary water issues so that governments, river basin organizations, and other stakeholders can make sound, evidence-based decisions. Read more about CIWA.

What is CIWA's approach to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)?

As part of its commitment to advancing gender equality within the transboundary water context, CIWA has provided support to address challenges women face at the institutional and program level to facilitate equitable and inclusive participation in transboundary water management processes associated with the programs it supports in sub-Saharan Africa.

CIWA believes that challenges women face within the water sector are linked to deep-rooted patriarchal norms and male domination which limit women's voice and participation in decision-making and program development and implementation. In response to these challenges, CIWA developed CIWA's transformative GESI Framework. The Framework promotes a transformative approach that hinges on disrupting cultural traditions and social norms that prevent women from getting to a place to participate equally in decision-making.

Women's empowerment within a transformational framework presumes equality at all levels and sectors of influence and involves a shift in gender relations by targeting all stakeholders, some of whom may be resistant to changing social norms. To do this CIWA is seeking to facilitate sustained, multi-sectoral, and multi-layered interventions at both programmatic and activity levels. This requires engaging key stakeholders across multiple sectors and layers of institutions and programs to find opportunities to transform power relationships and tackle gender inequalities. By promoting a holistic and integrated focus on women, men, and other vulnerable populations, the Framework also seeks to ensure that CIWA's investments in transboundary water management result in project outcomes that benefit all women and men as well as girls and boys associated with the support that CIWA provides. [Read more about CIWA's approach to GESI on the CIWA website.](#)

What has CIWA done concretely to demonstrate its commitment to gender equality?

CIWA has provided support to gender equality through a diversity of interventions ranging from support to individual women to advance their careers, promotion of gender equality through communications campaigns, and support to mainstreaming of GESI into the development and implementation of CIWA-funded projects in the targeted regions of sub-Saharan Africa.

For more details on how CIWA has provided support, please refer to the following blog posts:

- [Ethiopia Bisrat: A Water Resources Engineer Story](#)
- [Woman Engineer Paves the Way for Groundwater Access in Chongwe District, Zambia](#)
- [Young Women Take Charge of Managing Africa's Water Resources](#)
- [Applying a Gender and Social Inclusion Lens in the Transboundary Context](#)
- [Advancing towards a more gender-equal world in transboundary water management in Sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Context

What is the situation for women at the transboundary level?

The critical role that women play key in generating change in the way water is used, shared, and allocated is being increasingly acknowledged. Despite the key role they play at all levels ranging from the local to the transnational, there continue to be limitations in the space for women's participation in planning and decision-making that are linked to legal, regulatory, and institutional frameworks. To address inequalities connected to the involvement of women within transboundary water management institutions and systems, actions need to be taken to facilitate opportunities for them to secure the same benefits and opportunities as men. To facilitate equal access to water resources for all stakeholders, there is therefore a need to adopt an approach to water governance that is more inclusive and equitable. To accelerate transformations that have the potential to deliver more sustainable resources for both people and the natural world, a critical first step is to improve the recognition and appreciation of the key roles that women can play as leaders and decision-makers in the governance of shared waters. It is equally important to identify the differences in needs and priorities between women and men while capturing how actions should be tailored to accommodate these differences, many of which are linked to deep-seated inequalities between women and men. Key observations coming directly from the paper *Women as change-makers in the governance of shared waters* include¹:

- Women play a prominent role in the productive use and management of land and water resources through for example agriculture, forestry, and fishery, including across national boundaries. There is, however, a lack of recognition in many local and national contexts as well as at the regional and global levels,

¹ Fauconnier, I., Jenniskens, A., Perry, P., Fanaian, S., Sen, S., Sinha, V., Witmer, L. (2018). *Women as change-makers in the governance of shared waters*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN, viii + 50pp.

- Women are increasingly being recognized as drivers of innovation in their roles as users and managers of water resources. This includes at the transboundary level where they are adopting cooperative solutions and using knowledge in formal and informal resource management processes,
- Achievement of benefits has been noted in cases where women were involved in formal and informal decision-making related to water management. The benefits have ranged from higher policy attention to social and environmental issues to improved economic outcomes for women and their families, to women's empowerment in other realms,
- Women in local to transboundary contexts globally are demonstrating that they are key caretakers of knowledge on water use and sharing. Through their networks and by educating the future generations, they play major roles in knowledge dissemination and awareness raising. Unfortunately, women's knowledge, skills, and experience in water management are often overlooked or unrecognized, even by women themselves.
- Informal multi-stakeholder transboundary governance processes offer important opportunities for women to contribute to the construction of pathways to more formalized institutions and benefit-sharing measures that can be more stakeholder-inclusive and gender-equal.

Why is it challenging for women to participate as equals in the transboundary sector?

Key findings that account for the low participation of women in transboundary water management at either the institutional or project level as well as limited progress in addressing gender inequalities and social exclusion within the transboundary water management context include:

- **Water is a male-dominated sector:** This makes it difficult for women to find a safe and friendly setting to express their views, participate in meetings, and play a leadership role.
- **Governance structures fail to accommodate women.** Laws, policies, and strategies at the transboundary level are mostly silent on the promotion of gender issues. This limits the level of accountability and capacity to ensure that GESI issues are adequately addressed.
- **Women face socio-cultural barriers to working on water resource management.** Barriers are driven by strong patriarchal values in most African societies that position men as the key decision-makers and holders of power and limit women's access to and control over resources.
- **Women tend to be stereotyped as resource users.** Despite the key role they play as custodians of water as well as the heavy burden they bear when water is in short supply, women's role tends to be pigeonholed into the reproductive sphere. This limits how they are included and what role they play at the project and institutional level.

- **Water ministries and government departments tend to be led by men.** This is linked to obstacles women face in entering or operating in the water sector including a lack of access to education, sexual harassment, job insecurity, and comparatively lower pay levels.²
- **Failure to move from commitment to implementation.** Even when countries sign on to international, regional, or national agreements on gender and social inclusion, there is often a lack of capacity and willingness to apply the necessary financial and technical resources.
- **Regional institutions have achieved less progress.** Regional institutions addressing transboundary water management involve negotiations at the political level requiring the cooperation and agreement of multiple and often competing countries.³ This makes it difficult to ensure a consistent and harmonized approach to tackling GESI issues.
- **Women are denied access to water governance processes:** Although water governance is anticipated to become a cornerstone of global water security, space for women to participate in political decision-making is limited.
- **A lack of capacity and awareness.** Stakeholders at all levels and across all sectors tend to lack the capacity and understanding of why and how to apply GESI considerations. This means that local-level projects and institutional programming are frequently gender-blind.
- **Lack of a systematic approach:** Gender and social inclusion tend to be assigned to one individual or ministry, thereby limiting the ability to promote a systematic approach. Projects tend to include stand-alone interventions rather than integrating GESI considerations at all levels and across all sectors where the project is being implemented.
- **Failure to allocate adequate resources.** Allocating sufficient funding to apply a GESI lens at the project and program level throughout the project cycle is often overlooked because of a lack of appreciation of GESI's central importance to a project's success.
- **Gender is complex:** An understanding of the complex relationships between men and women or how gender norms are embedded in institutions, market forces, and cultural interactions is often not reflected in programs and projects, particularly in sectors that are technical and male-dominated, including water resource management (WRM).
- **One-off interventions:** Single interventions are inadequate to deal with the complex nature of gender inequality and social inclusion. To facilitate changes in norms and beliefs that drive gender inequality and social exclusion requires multiple interventions at multiple levels.

² Troell, Jessica and Yaari, Elizabeth. "Tapping our Potential: Women's Water Leadership in the Nile Basin", Policy Paper, July 2019.

³ Earle, Anton and Bazilli, Susan. "A gendered critique of transboundary water management" 2013, Feminist Critique.

- **Monitoring and evaluation are inadequate:** At both the program and project level, the gathering and analysis of disaggregated data is frequently overlooked. This is compounded by a failure to develop indicators or plan for monitoring that reflects GESI considerations.

What are the challenges women face at the institutional level of the water sector?

- Stereotypes and cultural norms about the expected roles that women play can impede their meaningful participation in local to transboundary water governance institutions and processes, which overlay already existing gender-unequal governance systems around land, natural resources, and economic planning.
- Gaps in legal and institutional frameworks continue to undermine the enabling environment for supporting and advancing gender equity in transboundary water governance.
- A lack of gender-disaggregated data in the water sector is a key impediment to identifying the full range of issues facing women and monitoring progress towards gender equity.
- Women remain underrepresented, particularly at leadership levels. In some cases, women face higher performance standards and bias, which end up holding women back.
- Inequities in educational opportunities, driven in part by stereotypes, prevent girls and women from obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary to become competitive for leadership positions in the water sector.
- Women are often not represented in equal numbers in associations placing a heavy burden on those who are representatives and reducing the likelihood that the voices of women will be heard.
- The presence of women in public spaces does not automatically result in them having decision-making power.
- The role of women in governance is undervalued resulting in their knowledge being underappreciated.
- Being a professional in WRM can mean meetings at inconvenient or late hours and missions or training exercises held at distant locations.
- Working hours can have a direct effect on the access of women to decision-making positions.
- Women can face sexual harassment or negative judgments about how they dress.
- Women are often overlooked for promotions in WRM because it is assumed they will become pregnant.

What are possible actions to address challenges at the institutional level?

- Ensure women's effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making around resources management, including in transboundary platforms and institutions. This can be facilitated by providing the resources, working with women's organizations, setting quotas, and ensuring that women's voices are heard and their contributions recognized in decision-making processes.⁴
- Create the enabling frameworks and policies and ensure there are financial and technical resources to facilitate their implementation.
- Take steps to explicitly acknowledge the value of women's knowledge, competencies, and knowledge dissemination capacities.
- Support women's networks and associations and build their institutional capacity to support efforts to promote women's empowerment and support women's roles.
- Disseminate knowledge and give peer-to-peer support around water resources management and decision-making to women as individuals and through their collective assemblies.
- Harmonize gender protocols including at the basin, regional, and national level.
- Collaborate with regional institutions and leverage their gender commitments.
- Identify ways to exert influence on Member States including by citing their commitments to gender equality.
- Leverage country and regional commitments to Agenda 2030 and combine the implementation of SDG 6 (water) and SDG 5 (gender).
- Mobilize and provide support to relevant stakeholders committed to gender equality from the governmental and non-governmental spheres.
- Advocate for the representation of women in decision-making structures and ensure that these are accompanied by policies, strategies, and work plans that reflect an understanding of gender issues.⁵
- Generate innovative informal dialogue spaces in which women can contribute their ideas for improved joint management of shared waters.
- Incorporate tested tools and approaches into policy and program design that will foster greater gender equality in both governance processes and in project and policy outcomes.
- Build capacity and ensure vocational training for women in all aspects of water management and decision-making, as well as establishing mentorship and learning exchange schemes.

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

- Undertake gender analysis and planning from the outset to inform program development and allocate sufficient resources to meet gender equality objectives.
- Create job opportunities for women in national and transboundary river basin authorities, local water management entities and water-related businesses including ensuring there are opportunities for them to advance to the senior level.
- Develop and deliver training on gender equality to relevant stakeholders to facilitate collective buy-in into gender equality and women’s empowerment.
- Ensure the collection and integration of sex-disaggregated data into policy and program documents.
- Recognize the value of traditional and indigenous knowledge, which women are often well-placed to hold and disseminate, and make use of it alongside “modern” knowledge in policies and projects.⁶

What are the challenges for women in the workplace?

- Most workplaces aren’t designed with women in mind.
- Lack of or insufficient allocation of time for maternity leave or childcare.
- Men have traditionally designed workplaces reflecting masculine values.
- Work environments where women’s physical, logistical, and emotional realities are not just overlooked but are often seen as inconvenient or exceptional.⁷
- The standard protocols and policies, from physical workspace design to the expected work hours and communication styles, are predominantly designed to accommodate traditional male norms.
- Many policies and cultural expectations intended to support women end up treating women unfairly.
- Behaviors linked to men e.g. independence, individuality, and rationality, are seen as positive attributes in a workplace characterized by competition and leadership.
- The contribution of commonly viewed feminine behaviors, such as caring, connection, and emotionality, are devalued or overlooked in the workplace.
- Informal rather than formal networks leave many women out of the loop.
- Regular scheduling of important meetings after normal working hours poses serious conflicts for staff. This tends to impact women much more due to the much higher burden they assume with domestic care responsibilities for children and the elderly.

⁶ ibid

⁷ Theus, D. “Breaking the Mold: Thriving as Women in the Workplace Built for Men, Jul 25, 2024 | [Diversity, Women in Leadership](https://inpowercoaching.com/women-in-the-workplace/), InPower Coaching, <https://inpowercoaching.com/women-in-the-workplace/>

In these situations, women are typically:

- given heightened attention or visibility,
- subject to higher performance pressure,
- isolated from informal social and professional networks,
- compared in an exaggerated manner to male peers, and
- more subject to gender stereotyping.

The result is often:

- Marginalization of women in the workplace
- Creation of a workplace culture that negatively impacts women's health and wellbeing
- High drop-out rates for women
- Women are overlooked for promotions, work advancement, and leadership positions
- Losing out on the special benefits women bring to the workplace
- As the relative percentage of women in the workplace reaches 35%, women begin to have a stronger voice and can influence the work culture and organization.⁸

Why do we need a women-friendly workplaces?

- Women in the workplace bring several unique and diverse strengths to leadership that are not only valuable but necessary for a well-rounded team.
- These strengths include but are not limited to:
 - exceptional communication skills,
 - empathy,
 - inclusiveness,
 - efficient productivity, and
 - strong capacity to build relationships.
- These qualities are key to creating a work environment that values collaboration and mutual respect.

What are possible responses in the workplace?

Possible responses include:

- Design daily work practices, e.g. hours of work, management of meetings, work planning processes, and staff communication, that acknowledge gender differences.
- Institute supportive policies to ensure women are not discriminated against based on pregnancy, motherhood, or family responsibilities.
- Develop policies and institute practices that enable women to easily return to work after maternity leave such as supporting access to affordable and quality childcare and caregiving support.
- Offer more flexible working hours and options.

⁸ Hunt, Dame Vivian, Yee, L. Prince, S. and Dixon-Fyle, S. Delivering through Diversity, McKinsey and Company, January 18, 2018

- Enable breastfeeding at work through paid breastfeeding breaks, adequate lactation facilities, and a supportive breastfeeding environment in the workplace.
- Institute menstrual hygiene considerations in toilets.
- Ensure protection from sexual harassment in the form of policies, programs, and capacity building of all staff members.
- Provide training for senior management and staff on how to create an open and respectful environment.
- Offer coaching and tools that support staff efforts to create an inclusive culture.
- Educate all employees about gender-inclusive and gender-sensitive language.
- Encourage gender-sensitive communications regarding language used, jokes, and comments.
- Implement a 'zero interruptions policy,' or step in to assert the speaking rights of the interrupted employee as a way to ensure every voice is heard.
- Promote genuine listening where everyone feels valued. This can be as simple as a nod, asking a follow-up question, or taking time to call on everyone to contribute.

What is the situation for women at the local level?

Water scarcity is a gendered issue, in terms of, access to clean drinking water, water to grow food, water for health and sanitation, and survival. Women do 2.6 times more unpaid care and domestic work than men. While families, societies, and economies depend on this work, for women, it leads to lower earnings and less time to engage in non-work activities. It is widely acknowledged that women play a key role in the collection and safeguarding of water for domestic and, in many cases, agricultural use, but have much less influence than men in management, problem analysis, and decision-making related to water resources. According to the 2011 report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation, in almost 'three-quarters of households without access to drinking water on premises, women and girls have the primary responsibility for collecting water. In some countries, the proportion is more than 90 percent. The Global Water Partnership (GWP) concludes that women play a leading role in the provision of water and the safeguarding of the resource. Despite this recognition, it is not adequately reflected in the institutional arrangements for water management.⁹

There are power differentials in terms of access and control over water by different groups of users including men, women, and other marginalized groups at all levels. Women are often excluded from participating in meetings associated with water resource management due to cultural issues, competing household responsibilities, and a lack of access to attend meetings. When they do attend, they often remain silent, or their voices are unheard. Attention to gender is essential to sound development practice and is at the heart of economic and social progress. Development cannot be maximized and sustained without recognition that every policy, program, and project affects women and men differently. Institutional decisions have direct consequences for water availability and access, creating challenges for local water managers who are often women.

⁹ Earle, Anton and Bazilli, Susan. "A gendered critique of transboundary water management" 2013, Feminist Critique.

Water management in the basin requires gender-sensitive planning that makes it possible for both women and men to participate as equals as users and managers of water resources is essential. Gender considerations need to be integrated into global governance (law and policy) instruments over transboundary surface and groundwater resources as well as into project planning and implementation.¹⁰ Gender needs to be part of the overall policy framework which can ensure that policies, programs, and projects address the differences in experiences and situations between and among women and men. Equal participation in social and political issues involves women's equal right to articulate their needs and interests, as well as their vision of society, and to shape the decisions that affect their lives. Their ability to do this can be strengthened through community organizations and institutions and by building participatory capacity. Consideration needs to be given to engaging women's organizations and networks to support the efforts of women to participate as equals as well as to institute measures to build their capacity. Measures also need to be put in place to facilitate women's equal participation including identifying times and locations for meetings to accommodate women faced with household responsibilities and lack of access to transport, creating spaces where women feel safe and comfortable in voicing their issues and needs while ensuring that men are open and respectful of inputs from women. This could include the hosting of separate consultations for women and other vulnerable populations.

What are international commitments to gender and water?

Beijing Platform for Action

The Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 is a global policy framework that outlines a roadmap for achieving gender equality and women's rights. It was adopted in 1995 at the United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. It highlights environmental issues as one critical area of concern: 'gender inequalities in the management and safeguarding of natural resources and the safeguarding of the environment'. Three strategic objectives were agreed upon: (i) to involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels; (ii) to integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programs for sustainable development; and (iii) to strengthen or establish mechanisms to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women.¹¹ [Read more about the Beijing Platform for Action.](#)

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

[The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. It defines gender equality as the norm, including access to water.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Women's equality and empowerment is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals but is also integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development. In short, all the SDGs depend on the achievement of Goal 5 which has positioned 'Gender Equality' as a stand-alone issue. As a follow-up to the MDGs, the SDGs have also moved beyond the weaker language of 'promotion'

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

and a narrower view of women’s empowerment, to cover gender and its intersection with development at all phases. Goal 6 (SDG 6) aims to provide universal access to water and sanitation, with a focus on gender equality through wording to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. Read more about [SDG 5](#) and [SDG 6](#).

The Dublin–Rio Principles

The [Dublin–Rio Principles](#) (1992), which form the basis of good water management practice under the integrated water resource management approach, provides for the equal participation of women and men in decision–making at all levels and are pre–conditions for achieving gender equality and equitable outcomes in the development, management, and provision of water resources.

Principle 3 of the Dublin–Rio Principles states that “women play a central part in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water.”

What does this mean for water management?

- Policies should be created to address the specific needs of women.
- Women should be empowered to participate in water resource programs, including decision–making and implementation.
- Gender–sensitive budgeting should be implemented.
- Curricula and training should be developed or adapted to be gender equitable.

Definitions

How does CIWA define gender and gender equality?

Gender is:

About women, girls, men, and boys including the different things that women and men think and do, and the relationships between them.

Gender is not:

- Only about women and girls:** Men and boys should also be part of the GESI equation.
- Only women’s responsibility:** For real change to happen, everyone needs to be involved.
- A Western or foreign concept:** Gender equality is a global commitment articulated in international, regional, and national commitments to which most countries worldwide are signatories.
- An attempt to take away the rights of men and boys:** Human rights are universal, which means that they apply to all human beings.
- Only an issue for gender specialists:** Relying solely on gender specialists cannot tackle the main drivers of gender inequality and social exclusion. Everyone needs to be involved.

Gender equality: According to the Harvard Business Review, gender equality is "a state of equal ease of access to resources and opportunities, irrespective of gender." It entails the absence of discrimination based on a person's gender in opportunities, allocation of resources or benefits, or access to services. It is about changing the norms and expectations about female and male roles and ultimately changing power relations by fostering a more balanced distribution of power within governments, companies, formal and informal institutions, and households.¹²

How does CIWA define and apply social inclusion?

Social Inclusion assumes that men and women are not homogeneous. Instead, they are stratified by age, ethnic origin, beliefs and practices, socio-cultural situation, and other vulnerabilities. Social inclusion therefore involves the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantaged based on their identity, to take part in society. Those who are disadvantaged can be discriminated against based on several different identities ranging from ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste, descent, gender, age, disability, HIV status, migrant status, or where they live.

CIWA recognizes the need for a deeper investigation of multiple overlapping differences and inequities within the transboundary context while ensuring that all people associated with CIWA programming regardless of sex, ethnicity, ability, and other vulnerabilities are all able to derive benefits. To better understand how women and men within different social groups and geographical locations are affected differently, and to varying extents within the transboundary water context, CIWA seeks to promote a broad-based understanding of social inclusion across all levels and sectors of the projects that it supports. For more details on CIWA's work on social inclusion, please refer to the [related blog post](#) and [learning note](#).

Using an intersectional gender lens is key to addressing data gaps on the connections between gender and vulnerabilities as well as facilitating the social inclusivity of programming. CIWA developed a tool kit specifically targeted to social development and related experts to provide technical expertise on the development and implementation of CIWA programming at the institutional and project level that takes into consideration the social inclusion dimension. Working together with CIWA teams, the tool kit provides significant detail to assist experts in understanding the critical steps they can take to facilitate the integration of social inclusion considerations throughout the project cycle. [See the CIWA Social Inclusion Toolkit](#).

CIWA has also developed a [complementary two-page resource](#) targeted to program managers and related staff to provide an overview to CIWA staff and partners of some of the key steps that can be taken to facilitate the inclusion of a social inclusion lens.

About MCWE

Why did CIWA establish MCWE?

Because men are often the key stakeholders, influencers, and decision-makers in water institutions and local organizations, CIWA developed the Male Champion for Women's Empowerment (MCWE) to work directly with men to identify ways to apply their influence to overcome gender inequalities and to effect positive change on gender equality within the transboundary water context at multiple levels and across domains.

¹² World Bank Group Gender Equality, Poverty Reduction and Inclusive Growth, *Gender Strategy (2016-2023)*.

When did MCWE start?

When MCWE started as a pilot program in June 2023, it was referred to as the Male Champions Forum. The pilot program included ten Male Champions principally from East and the Horn of Africa. The pilot kicked off with a one-day online learning event. Participants engaged in interactive discussions with CIWA's GESI Expert to learn about foundational dimensions of Gender and Social Inclusion as well as to reflect upon and provide input into becoming a Male Champion including the role they can play. Initially, the Male Champions met virtually every month, but in September 2024 they decided to meet quarterly. [Watch the program launch video.](#)

Who are the Male Champions?

As of March 2025, MCWE has a roster of 23 Male Champions for the East and Horn of Africa, Southern Africa, and West Africa. The Male Champions come from a broad spectrum of organizations and institutions ranging from river basin organizations and global water partnerships to NGOs and individual consultancies. [Read the profiles of the current CIWA Male Champions.](#)

What are the objectives of MCWE?

Engage Male Champions to individually and collectively take actions to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in transboundary water institutions and programs in SSA. Specific objectives include:

1. **Increase awareness** about the critical role that men can play in championing gender equality in the transboundary water context,
2. **Identify actions and initiatives** that Male Champions can take to advance gender equality in transboundary institutions, and
3. **Facilitate opportunities** for Male Champions to take individual and collective actions to create opportunities for women to play a greater role in transboundary water institutions and projects including as leaders and decision-makers.

For more details about the MCWE, please refer to the [MCWE webpage](#).

What does MCWE aim to achieve?

Please see the [MCWE Action Plan](#).

For background information, please refer to the MCWE blog post: [Male Champions for Women's Empowerment: Who Has the Power to Make Decisions?](#)

What actions have Male Champions committed to taking?

Please see the [MCWE Action Plan](#).

What has MCWE done to date?

One-day Virtual Meeting: In June 2023, CIWA rolled out the Male-Champion pilot in selected sub-regions in Africa. Eight Male Champions representing different segments of the water sector participated in a one-day pilot workshop. Each of the Male Champions was selected based on their strong commitment to gender equality and a professional and personal experience promoting gender equality in the water sector. Experiences of Male Champions range from conducting gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation, working as a Gender Focal Point, establishing a women's mentorship program, and promoting gender equality in the [Nile Basin Discourse](#) activities.

Monthly Meetings: Since the start of the initiative, CIWA has facilitated one-hour monthly meetings where Male Champions have shared experiences and provided input to fellow Male Champions about strategies to overcome obstacles preventing women's empowerment. The virtual meetings have also served as a basis to identify and plan for action.

Development of an Action Plan: During the pilot phase, a draft action plan was developed. The Plan has subsequently been reviewed and validated at the MCWE face-to-face meeting in Lesotho in October 2024. The plan includes short and long-term actions that are connected to indicators to capture results. [Read more in the Action Plan.](#)

Webpage: The CIWA website hosts a [webpage for the MCWE initiative](#) to facilitate engagement and promotion.

Co-Hosting of Webinar with Women in Water Development Network: On September 17, 2024, MCWE co-convened a successful online learning event with [the Women in Water Development Network \(WWDN\)](#). The exchange seminar offered an opportunity for members and supporters from CIWA's Africa network and WWDN's global network to meet each other virtually and foster deeper collaboration. The event also sought to identify challenges and barriers women face in taking leadership and decision-making roles within transboundary water-related processes and institutions while examining the role that Male Champions can play in addressing identified challenges and barriers. Aside from the benefits of forging a strategic partnership with WWDN, Male Champions saw the event as critical to guiding their future actions. In particular, they were able to hear directly from women coming from 40 countries involved in the water sector about the challenges they face operating in a male-dominated environment. After learning about the obstacles, participants then put forward appropriate actions that Male Champions should take to overcome them.

[View the full event recording](#) or [read the after-event report](#).

Waternet Symposium Side Event: On October 30, 2024, [CIWA organized a side event as part of the 25th Waternet Symposium in Maseru, Lesotho](#). The side event was organized to introduce the objectives, approach, and merits of CIWA's Male Champions for Women's Empowerment initiative, to facilitate the identification of challenges and barriers women face in taking leadership and decision-making roles within transboundary water-related processes and institutions, and to examine possible roles that Male Champions can play to address these identified challenges and barriers.

What actions will be taken as a follow-up to the meeting of MCWE in Lesotho?

- a. **Preparation of Individual Pledges:** Individual Male Champions will develop their own pledges that will be posted on the MCWE website and will be used as a way to review their commitments and hold individual Male Champions to account.
- b. **Development of a Collective Pledge:** It was agreed that a group pledge should be developed for the Male Champions for Women's Empowerment.
- c. **Online training on Gender Equality:** To ensure they have a sufficient understanding of gender equality and its application within their own work context, Male Champions will be participating in a one-day online training workshop in 2025.
- d. **Capturing Women's Perspective:** Male Champions agreed that MCWE actions must build upon what they have heard from women in terms of what they need and what they feel are appropriate actions. As an overriding principle, any interventions undertaken should be based on input and evidence that reflects the perspective of women generally and within the specific contexts where they operate. It should seek to capture the challenges women face and what they feel would be appropriate strategies and roles that men should play to overcome barriers women face and to promote women's empowerment. Efforts should be taken to track, monitor, and document what women say are the barriers they face and what they want. This could include the hosting of consultation meetings similar to the online event co-hosted with Women in Water Diplomacy Network on September 17 and the hosting of the side event hosted on October 30 at the Waternet Forum. Research and documentation of findings will be an ongoing activity undertaken by CIWA and by Male Champions.
- e. **Recruitment of New Male Champions:** Steps need to be taken to recruit new Male Champions by individual Male Champions and through collective events such as the organization of a webinar. This should be seen as something that all Male Champions commit to doing. [Access the MCWE application page.](#)
- f. **Development of a Code of Ethics:** It will be important to develop a Code of Ethics so that Male Champions can be held accountable for adopting responsible and ethical behavior. For example, it was discussed that MCWE should have zero tolerance for Male Champions who have been found guilty of sexual harassment or Gender-Based Violence. The Code of Ethics will be developed in 2025.
- g. **Organization of Learning Events:** To enable Male Champions to continue to learn and apply their knowledge in their roles as Male Champions, additional learning events will be organized. In March 2025, CIWA will be co-hosting a learning event with Equal Aqua focused on understanding how to create a gender-friendly work environment.

What are key considerations and challenges that have been identified to date?

The following considerations were identified as part of a review of possible actions that MCWE should take at the MCWE Face-to-Face meeting held in Maseru, Lesotho on October 29, 2024:

Operating at Multiple Levels: Problems around gender inequality often start at the national level. It is, therefore, necessary to identify national commitments to gender equality and consider how to hold to account the relevant ministries and institutions at the national level as a critical way to enable MCWE and CIWA to be effective in promoting gender equality at the regional level.

Dealing with attrition: It is critical to ensure that a core group of Male Champions remains active and engaged within the MCWE. To do so, steps should be taken to consider the profile of candidates. This includes taking into consideration that participants, particularly those at the senior level, often have multiple commitments that can limit their ability to participate regularly. Recruitment should be open to multiple levels within an organization. While it is key that applicants have direct involvement with institutions linked to the transboundary water sector, consideration should also be given to applicants from a diversity of backgrounds ranging from academia, the private sector, and civil society.

Capturing Women's Perspective: MCWE actions should build upon evidence gathered from women in terms of what they need and what they feel are appropriate actions that men should take. Steps should be taken through the organization of consultations, learning events, and a review of relevant literature to track, monitor, and document what women say are the barriers they face and what support they need from men.

Addressing Sustainability: Concerns were raised about the sustainability of MCWE including challenges with the recruitment and retention of Male Champions. It was therefore recommended that the issue of sustainability be reviewed with the possibility of developing a sustainability plan.