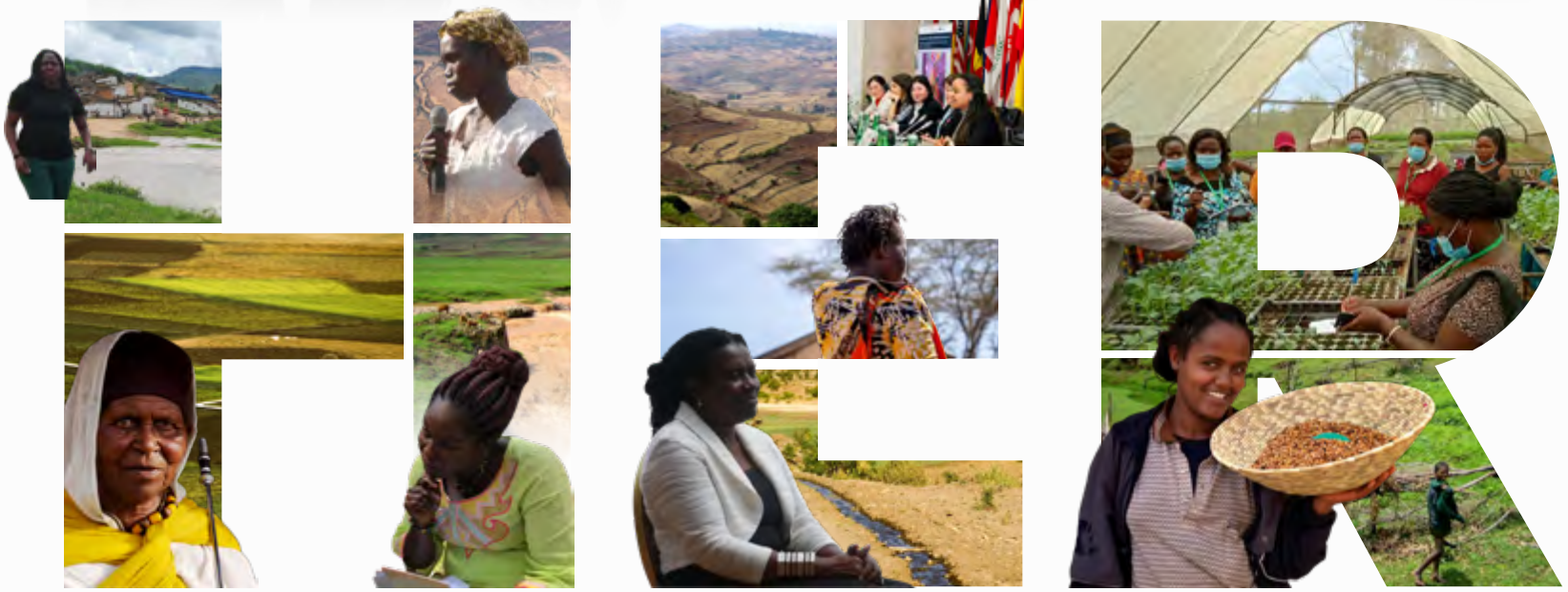
COOPERATION IN
INTERNATIONAL
WATERS IN AFRICA

STANDING WITH HER



Voices of CIWA's Male Champions:
Stories and Reflections on Women's Empowerment

CIWA PROGRAM | INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2026

WORLD BANK GROUP

MALE CHAMPIONS
FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

CONTRIBUTORS



MOKHOTHU MOERANE

GENDER TRAINING AS A CATALYST FOR MALE CHAMPIONS IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Gender Training as a Catalyst for Male Champions in Women's Empowerment



DR. PINIMIDZAI SITHOLE

STANDING WITH HER AT THE WATER SOURCE: HOW TOXIC MASCULINITY KEEPS WOMEN THIRSTY

An exploration of how broken systems and harmful norms keep women excluded from water governance in Africa.



DONALD KASONGI

STANDING WITH HER IN INSTITUTIONS: MOBILIZING MALE LEADERSHIP FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN WATER

Insights on institutional change, gender equality, and the role of male decision-makers in transforming water governance.



DEREJE GEBREMICHAEL

STANDING WITH HER ON THE LAND: FAITH, CULTURE, AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ETHIOPIA

A case study from Ethiopia on engaging religious leaders as allies for women's land ownership and justice.



LAWRENCE NDERE

STANDING WITH HER STARTS AT HOME: RAISING BOYS FOR EQUALITY

A personal reflection on masculinity, emotional health, and how changing how we raise boys shapes gender equality.



ASSEFA GUDINA

STANDING WITH HER ACROSS BORDERS: WHY THE EASTERN NILE BASIN NEEDS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Why transboundary water cooperation must include women's leadership to achieve sustainability and peace.



ENOCK S. KIMINTA

STANDING WITH HER FOR JUSTICE: WATER EQUALITY AS GENDER EQUALITY

A powerful call for men to challenge toxic masculinity and stand with women in the fight for equitable water access.

INTRODUCTION

The Male Champions for Women's Empowerment (MCWE) initiative of the Cooperation in International Waters in Africa (CIWA) program works with a cadre of men in Africa who pledge to take steps to support the active participation of women within the transboundary water context.

CIWA believes that Male Champions are uniquely placed to engage with other men to advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment in transboundary water organizations at the local, national, regional, and continental levels.

Standing with Her is a CIWA publication that brings together the voices and reflections of seven CIWA Male Champions. Through personal stories, professional experiences, and thoughtful analysis, these leaders share how men can help transform institutions, shift mindsets, and create space for women's leadership in water governance.

Together, these reflections highlight a simple but powerful message:

ACHIEVING WATER SECURITY IN AFRICA REQUIRES GENDER EQUALITY.



MOKHOTHU MOERANE

GENDER TRAINING AS A CATALYST FOR MALE CHAMPIONS IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Attending the gender training was a transformative experience that broadened my understanding of gender equality and strengthened my commitment as a Male Champion. The training created a powerful space for dialogue, reflection, and learning, bringing together individuals devoted to building inclusive approaches to water governance and community development.

Throughout the sessions, participants were encouraged to reflect deeply on their own beliefs, behaviors, and responsibilities. The environment fostered honest conversations and challenged long-held assumptions, making it clear that meaningful change begins with self-awareness and accountability.

GENDER AT THE CENTER OF DEVELOPMENT

One of the strongest messages from the training was that gender is no longer a peripheral issue. It has become central to shaping inclusive communities, effective workplaces, and resilient institutions. Gender-balanced environments bring richer perspectives, stronger decision-making, and more sustainable outcomes.

Despite notable progress, women continue to face systemic barriers. These include limited family-friendly workplace policies, unfair expectations around work–life balance, sexual harassment, persistent pay gaps, and organizational cultures that undervalue women's leadership and expertise. These challenges are not isolated incidents; they are deeply embedded in institutional and social structures.

WHAT MALE CHAMPIONS MUST UNDERSTAND

The training addressed critical themes that guide gender-transformative work, including gender-based violence, masculinity, inclusive leadership, representation, communication, conflict resolution, and power dynamics. These topics shape how societies evolve and define what Male Champions must understand and speak about with confidence and a sense of responsibility.

Being a Male Champion is not about perfection. It is about continual growth, honest reflection, and the willingness to use one's voice and position to advocate for fairness. It requires recognizing privilege, questioning harmful norms, and committing to learning—even when it is uncomfortable.

THE LIVED REALITIES OF WOMEN

A significant part of the training program focused on the challenges women continue to face in professional and social spaces. Women experience maternity-related discrimination, stereotypes about their intellectual capacity, and dismissal of their ideas unless reinforced by male voices. Cultural norms discourage women from pursuing careers in science and engineering and restrict women's leadership opportunities.



WATER TREATMENT PLANT OPERATOR, WATER AND SEWAGE COMPANY, LESOTHO

Women whose careers require relocation are often judged harshly, while those who earn higher salaries may face social discomfort rooted in male insecurity and resentment. These realities highlight the depth of the structural and cultural barriers that persist and the urgency of deliberate, sustained action.

TURNING COMMITMENT INTO ACTION

The training emphasized that Male Champions have a responsibility to actively challenge these entrenched patterns. Advocating for and supporting equal representation in leadership—beginning with national institutions such as Parliament—are essential. Promoting gender equality within families by ensuring equal opportunities for boys and girls helps shift mindsets at their foundation.

Practical actions include creating policies that protect pregnant women at work, promoting 50/50 leadership representation, placing full trust in women's capabilities, and consistently monitoring progress on gender equality. These steps move gender equality from aspiration to practice.

A RENEWED SENSE OF PURPOSE

What the training contributed most to my role as a Male Champion was a renewed clarity of purpose. Gender training is not just a program; it is a driving force for lasting change. It equips men with emotional intelligence, challenges harmful norms, and encourages responsibility in both public and private spaces.

It reinforces the understanding that achieving and maintaining equality is a collective responsibility—not a burden that should be placed on women alone.

STANDING UP AND SPEAKING OUT

Male Champions are fathers, teachers, leaders, brothers, friends, and colleagues who choose to stand up and speak out. We are not perfect, but we are committed to using our influence to challenge harmful norms and create environments where women can participate fully and confidently.

For communities to be stronger, safer, and more united, men must continue to be visible allies—willing to learn, reflect, and act. Through sustained commitment and intentional action, we can help build a society where women are empowered, respected, and fully represented.

DR. PINIMIDZAI SITHOLE

STANDING WITH HER AT THE WATER SOURCE: HOW TOXIC MASCULINITY KEEPS WOMEN THIRSTY

Water is life, but for millions of women and girls across Africa, it is also a daily struggle, a stolen dream, and a reminder of the inequality that shapes our societies. Every morning before sunrise, women and girls walk for hours, balancing jerrycans on their heads, their backs bent under the physical and emotional weight of survival.

They walk not just for water; they walk through systems built to fail them, through mindsets that silence them, and through cultures that exclude them from the tables where decisions are made about water use and other aspects of their lives.

At the heart of this reality lies an uncomfortable truth: toxic masculinity and broken governance systems are keeping women thirsty and vulnerable.

WHEN RESPONSIBILITY LACKS POWER

In many African communities, domestic water use is considered women's responsibility, yet men control how it is managed. They dominate water governance boards, set the rules, sign agreements, and decide which communities receive boreholes. Women remain largely voiceless in water committees, invisible in budget planning, and powerless in policies designed without their lived realities.

This imbalance is not accidental. It is cultural, systemic, and deeply patriarchal. Toxic masculinity—the belief that leadership, strength, and authority belong to men—has permeated water governance, turning men into gatekeepers of a resource women need to survive.

When women attempt to speak up, they are often met with condescension, ridicule, or violence. In some cases, the same hands meant to provide water infrastructure exploit women through the cruel practice known as "sex for water." Women's dignity and safety become the price of access to a basic human necessity.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF EXCLUSION

Nasieku, a 34-year-old woman from Kajiado County in Kenya, begins her day before sunrise. Before preparing her children for school, she embarks on a six-kilometer journey to fetch water, balancing two heavy jerrycans as her children cling to her skirt.

At the communal borehole, she faces another barrier: a male-dominated water committee that decides who receives priority. Some days she is turned away.

On others, she endures inappropriate comments from men guarding the pump. By the time she returns home, the sun is high and school has already begun. Nasieku's story is not an exception—it is the lived reality of millions of women and girls across Africa.

SYSTEMS THAT FAIL AND MASCULINITY THAT CONTROLS

Across the continent, water systems are collapsing. Pipes run dry, boreholes break down, and rivers disappear under the pressure of climate change and poor governance. Programs proudly proclaim "community participation," yet rarely ask who is included in that community. When women's voices are excluded, failure is virtually inevitable.

Toxic masculinity is not just an attitude; it is an inherited social code shaped by colonial legacies, religious interpretations, and economic hardship. When men experience unemployment or loss of power elsewhere, control over essential resources such as water becomes a way to reassert dominance.

INVITING MEN TO LEAD DIFFERENTLY

Change will not come by sidelining men. It will come by challenging them to lead differently. African men must stand up for women, not above them. They must call out "sex for water" as abuse, challenge conversations that mock female leadership, and open decision-making spaces to women.

Water belongs to everyone. Until women are at the center of its management, communities will remain half-led, half-heard, and half-served.



PROGRAM OFFICER,
GLOBAL WATER PARTNERSHIP
SOUTHERN AFRICA

FROM THIRST TO TRANSFORMATION

There are signs of hope. Across Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Ethiopia, women are emerging as leaders in water governance, from grassroots Water Resources Associations to national and regional platforms. When women lead, communities thrive.

But transformation requires more. Governments must dismantle bureaucratic bias, fund women-led initiatives, and move beyond token inclusion. Cultural and religious leaders must redefine masculinity as partnership with women rather than dominance over them. Development partners must invest in cultural change alongside infrastructure.

WATER EQUALITY IS GENDER JUSTICE

The water crisis cannot be solved without addressing the gender crisis. Sustainable development is impossible when half the population is excluded from decision making.

Until women are present, heard, and leading, Africa will remain thirsty—not for water, but for equality, dignity, and shared humanity. It is time to build a continent where women do not walk for water—they lead it home.

DONALD KASONGI

HOW TO SPUR MALE LEADERS TO EMPOWER WOMEN IN WATER INSTITUTIONS

PATRIARCHY IN WATER GOVERNANCE

It is no secret that water resources management institutions in Africa are strongly patriarchal. They are typically run by men. Men make decisions, while women must fight to make their voices heard—and when they do speak up, they are sometimes squelched.

Donald knows this because he saw it in action. Gender inequality in water organizations is one part deeply seated patriarchal attitudes and one-part structural complexity with a dash of hierarchical approaches to management. These institutions are characterized by a lack of flexibility in governance undergirded by rigid social and gender norms.

SIGNS OF CHANGE

At the same time, Donald has observed emerging changes in attitudes about gender roles in water management and even some steps taken to mainstream gender as an entry point for women's empowerment at local, subnational, and national levels. These steps are commendable

One promising example is the formation of Water Committees with equal representation of women and men. These committees are working to embed gender considerations into national water policy formulation and consultation processes.

WHAT GENDER EQUALITY IS—AND IS NOT

After nearly two decades of working on gender issues, he has learned that gender equality is not simply about numbers. It is about changing the social norms that silence women and restrict their self-determination. It is about reforming institutions and policies to enable men and women to work together collaboratively and as equals.

Moving from rhetoric to action requires leadership readiness and flexibility, followed by the development of actionable SMART plans—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound—within institutions genuinely committed to inclusion.

POCKETS OF PROGRESS

Some initiatives are already making an impact. The Male Champions for Women's Empowerment initiative, supported by CIWA, promotes transformative learning and behavioral change. Since its establishment in 2023, it has catalyzed reviews of decision-support frameworks and fostered peer learning among Male Champions.

Online learning days and joint events with partners such as Women in Water Diplomacy, Equal Aqua—the World Bank's platform that supports gender diversity in water sector jobs, and WaterNet—a regional network of university departments and research and training institutes specializing in water—have helped accelerate progress within regional river basin organizations.

LESSONS FOR TRANSFORMATION

EMERGING LESSONS THAT ENRICH THE COLLABORATION INCLUDE :

LEADERSHIP:

Male decision-makers play an irreplaceable role in translating policy into action on the road to empowering women in water resources management from the grassroots to transboundary levels.

INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION:

Institutions must share even incremental successes and learn directly from women's lived experiences about what they consider to be meaningful changes.

INTENTIONAL LEARNING:

Learning and cross-learning are not naturally embedded in institutions; they require nurturing to safeguard progress and incentivize frontline women (and men) willing to take gender equality processes forward.

REGULAR REVIEW OF INFLUENCES ON GENDER EQUALITY:

Mapping intersecting influences on women's voices is critical to system change.

The initiative demonstrates how a critical mass of men can evolve into a visible, determined movement for gender equality in water governance.

> **"GENDER EQUALITY IS NOT ONLY ABOUT HOW MANY WOMEN ARE IN THE ROOM; IT IS ABOUT CHANGING THE SOCIAL NORMS THAT KEEP WOMEN OPPRESSED AND SILENT."**



FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NILE BASIN DISCOURSE

DEREJE GEBREMICHAEL

IMPROVING WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS THROUGH A FAITH-BASED APPROACH—THE ENGAGEMENT OF CIWA'S MALE CHAMPIONS IN ETHIOPIA

Land is a vital resource for economic survival, particularly in rural communities dependent on agriculture. Yet women continue to face major barriers to land ownership stemming from deeply-rooted patriarchal cultural and social norms.

FAITH AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) plays a central role in Ethiopian society. Its priests—respected as community "fathers"—hold moral authority that can advance women's land rights and gender justice.

In collaboration with GIZ and Landesa, I designed a pilot project—Ethiopian Church Leaders as Allies for Women's Land Rights—to engage religious leaders as agents of change. The project aimed to strengthen the legitimacy of women's land rights, enhance women's control over land and resources, and promote equitable participation in land-use decisions.

FROM THEOLOGY TO COMMUNITY ACTION

The project produced a national reference guide and training materials rooted in theological reflection on women's land rights. Seventy clergy members were trained and equipped to train others, while 45 community members were prepared to lead local dialogues.

A post-training assessment showed that trained clergy reached over 40,000 people through church and community platforms. Media content broadcast on EOTC-TV further expanded the project's reach.

National workshops disseminated lessons learned, and experience-sharing sessions inspired other land-rights advocates to adopt faith-based approaches. Integrating religious, legal, and community perspectives proved effective in addressing women's land ownership challenges.

> **"WHEN FAITH-BASED PERSPECTIVES ARE COMBINED WITH LEGAL AND COMMUNITY APPROACHES, WOMEN'S LAND OWNERSHIP CAN BE ADDRESSED MORE EFFECTIVELY."**



SENIOR PROJECT, PROGRAM, AND GRANT PROFESSIONAL
MEMBER OF THE ETHIOPIAN NILE DISCOURSE

LAWRENCE NDERE

RAISING BOYS DIFFERENTLY: THE PERSPECTIVE OF A MALE CHAMPION FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The future of gender equality depends not only on empowering girls but also on how we raise boys. Across Africa, boys are often taught that strength means emotional silence. Crying is discouraged. Vulnerability is framed as weakness.

I witnessed the consequences firsthand while serving on a youth group's executive committee, where one young man displayed persistent aggression. Only later did we learn he had recently lost his father and been forced into assuming adult responsibility in his family without space to grieve.

WHAT BOYS ARE TAUGHT BECOMES WHAT MEN BECOME

This experience reinforced a critical lesson: suppressed emotions do not disappear—they surface as anger, violence, or harm. Through my work as a Male Champion, I have learned how norms around toughness plant the seeds of emotional instability and gender-based violence.

FIVE PRECEPTS FOR RAISING BOYS DIFFERENTLY

1. Being emotional is not weakness

2. Modeling respect from a young age

3. Challenging harmful gender norms

4. Encouraging shared responsibilities

5. Creating safe spaces for boys

These principles help raise men who are confident without being aggressive, strong without being cruel, and proud without being arrogant.

SHAPING THE FUTURE

Raising boys differently is about building safer homes, healthier relationships, and more just societies. When we nurture empathy, accountability, and respect in boys, we lay the foundation for lasting gender equality.

> **A REAL MAN DOES NOT CRY—THIS IS THE MESSAGE MANY BOYS GROW UP BELIEVING, AND IT PLANTS THE SEEDS OF QUIET HARM.**



HYDROGEOLOGIST
MINISTRY OF LANDS, AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES, WATER AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT, ZIMBABWE

ASSEFA GUDINA

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR EQUALITY: WHY THE EASTERN NILE BASIN NEEDS A GENDER FORUM NOW

For decades, Nile Basin cooperation has focused on infrastructure, diplomacy, and development, while gender equality remained overlooked. Exclusion continues to shape who leads, decides, and benefits from shared water resources.

The new Gender Forum for the Eastern Nile Basin recognizes that sustainable water governance requires inclusive leadership, especially as climate change and water scarcity intensify regional pressures.

THE PERSISTENT GENDER GAP

Despite progress through the Nile Basin Initiative, women remain severely underrepresented across leadership and negotiation roles in the region. Male-dominated norms have produced rigid workplaces, exclusionary diplomacy, and poorly implemented gender policies.

These inequalities weaken institutions and reduce the effectiveness of water programs.

WHY A GENDER FORUM MATTERS

The Forum translates policy into action by engaging both women leaders and Male Champions for Women's Empowerment. This dual approach addresses bias while expanding leadership pathways for women.

ITS OBJECTIVES INCLUDE:

- Collaborative platforms
- Practical actions by Male Champions
- Leadership opportunities for women
- Awareness and attitude shifts

Through training, baseline studies, outreach, and long-term mentorship, the Forum aims to deliver both immediate gains and systemic change—strengthening institutions and fostering inclusive water diplomacy across the Eastern Nile Basin.

> **GENDER EQUALITY IS NO LONGER ONLY A RIGHTS-BASED AGENDA; IT IS A PRACTICAL NECESSITY FOR BETTER DECISION MAKING AND LONG-TERM PEACE.**



GENDER FOCIAL POINT
EASTERN NILE TECHNICAL REGIONAL OFFICE

ENOCK S. KIMINTA

TOXIC MASCULINITY AND BROKEN SYSTEMS KEEP WOMEN THIRSTY IN AFRICA

Water is life, yet for millions of African women and girls it is a daily burden shaped by inequality. Women walk long distances for water while being excluded from decisions about its management.

At the core of this crisis lies toxic masculinity and broken governance systems.

MASCULINITY, CONTROL, AND HARM

Women bear responsibility for water collection, yet men dominate governance structures. This imbalance enables exploitation, including the abusive practice of "sex for water," where dignity and safety become the price of survival.

Toxic masculinity—shaped by history, religion, and economic pressure—encourages dominance over partnership with women. When control extends to essential resources such as water, communities lose time, opportunity, and future potential.

FROM THIRST TO JUSTICE

Change requires men to lead differently: calling out abuse, challenging harmful narratives, and creating decision-making spaces. Water belongs to everyone, and governance must reflect that truth.

Across Africa, women are emerging as water leaders. But lasting transformation requires governments, cultural leaders, and development partners to invest in gender equality as seriously as they do infrastructure.

Until women are present, heard, and leading, Africa will remain thirsty—not for water, but for justice.

> **UNTIL WOMEN ARE AT THE CENTER OF WATERMANAGEMENT, COMMUNITIES WILL REMAIN HALF-LED, HALF-HEARD, AND HALF-SERVED.**



HYDROLOGIST AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, KENAWRUA

STANDING WITH HER:

A COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT

Across Africa, women continue to carry water, are deprived of access to land and relegated to domestic roles, and lack equal voice, power, and recognition. The stories in this booklet reflect different contexts, institutions, and personal journeys, but they are united by one truth—gender equality is not a women's issue alone. It is a shared responsibility.

As Male Champions for Women's Empowerment under the World Bank's Cooperation in International Waters in Africa (CIWA) program, we acknowledge that systems of inequality are sustained not only by policy gaps and resource constraints, but also by attitudes, norms, and silence. We also recognize that men—particularly those in positions of influence—have a responsibility to challenge these systems from within.

tanding with women means more than expressing support. It means listening when women speak and ensuring that their voices shape decisions. It means questioning traditions and practices that exclude, harm, or silence women. It means opening doors to leadership, sharing power, and holding institutions accountable for equality in practice—not just on paper.

We have learned that transformation happens at many levels, in:

- Homes where boys are raised to respect and express emotion;
- Communities where women's lived realities guide development priorities;
- Faith institutions that affirm justice and dignity; and
- Water and land governance systems where women lead alongside men;
- Regional and transboundary spaces where cooperation is built on inclusion.

Being a Male Champion is not about having all the answers. It is about showing up, learning continuously, reflecting honestly, and acting intentionally. It is about using influence to dismantle barriers rather than reinforce them, and about understanding that progress for women strengthens families, institutions, and societies as a whole.

On this International Women's Day 2026, we reaffirm our commitment to stand with women—not occasionally or symbolically, but consistently and visibly. We commit to speaking out when inequality persists, supporting women's leadership in all its forms, and working with women as equal partners in shaping a more just and sustainable future.

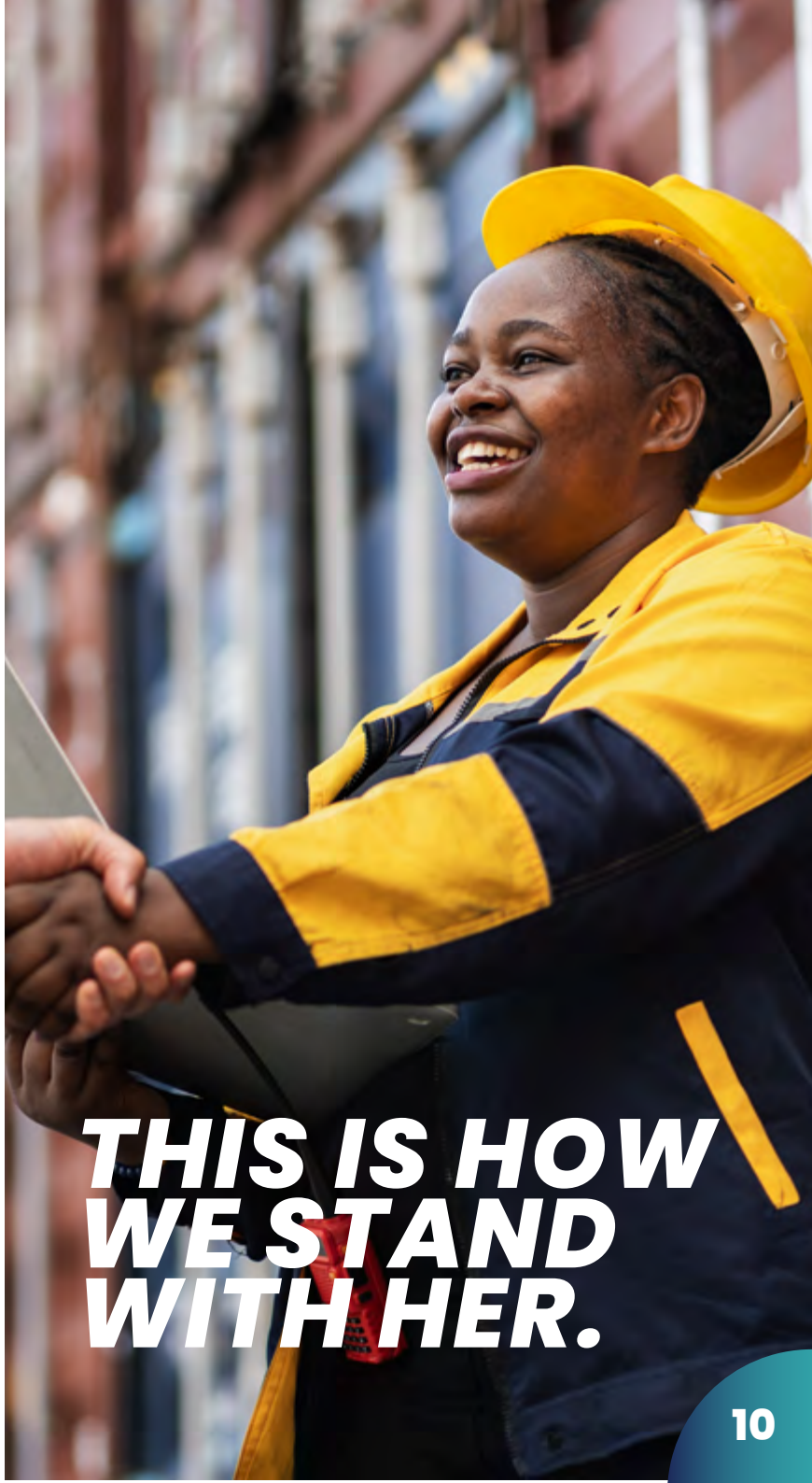
When women are empowered, communities are stronger.

When leadership is shared, systems are more resilient.

And when men stand with women, equality moves from promise to practice.

THIS IS OUR COMMITMENT.

THIS IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY.



www.ciwaprogram.org

@CIWAprogram

linkedin.com/company/cooperation-in-international-waters-in-africa

Austrian Development Cooperation

Co-funded by the European Union

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark
Danida

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Sweden
Sverige

UKaid
from the British people