



WOMEN, WATER,  
CLIMATE:  
TACKLING THE  
CHALLENGES  
JANUARY 2021



# THE WAY FORWARD

*The Way Forward seeks to lay foundations for a strong voice, and choice for all women, the community, and water professionals, proposing climate-resilient, gender cognisant decision-making.*



## Webinar 2

8 OCTOBER

### WOMEN, WATER, CLIMATE: TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

## drinkPani: Nepali Women & Youth in Action

An international conference delivered by Women for Water Partnership (WfWP) in conjunction with its partners NetWwater (NWW) and Soroptimist International of the Southwest Pacific (SISWP), promoted crucial dialogue between experts, youth water professionals, and women community leaders.

The 'Women, Water, Climate: Tackling the Challenges' two-day conference was supported by SEI Asia's Strategic Collaborative Fund and was preceded by a series of eight 75-minute webinars, illustrating the experiences of women in seven South and Southeast Asian countries, and their response to the challenges of water security and climate change.

Featured over four weeks in October 2020, the eight webinars delivered case studies from Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, presenting emerging issues related to climate change, water security, water management, and conservation. They included question and answer sessions and interventions by young water professionals, and water experts, and the perspectives of women, youth, indigenous peoples, and minority groups.

Expertly illustrating the dominance of climate change challenges on communities, and the powerful and life-altering role of women in tackling issues, the webinars provided tangible solutions in response to the threat posed to water and food security. Furthermore, the conference delivered on its objective to foster regional cooperation and policy dialogue for sustainable development and environmental sustainability, through capacity building, knowledge sharing, and increased collaboration.

Crucially recognising the nexus between women, water, and climate, the conference found climate change and water security to be acute and critical development issues in South and Southeast Asia. Despite growing numbers of the population emerging out of poverty, safe and adequate access to quality water remains a critical issue for populations. During the past 20 years, floods and droughts, two of the predominant water and climate-related disasters have resulted in more than 166,000 deaths, impacting a further three billion people, and causing total economic damage of an estimated US\$700 billion.

# The onset of a pandemic

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic threatening lives and livelihood, sufficient availability of water is essential to the provision of safe water, sanitation and adequate hygiene to reduce virus transmission. Asian countries such as India have proven some of the hardest hit, specifically in urban overcrowded populations and remote rural areas. Moving forward, the necessity for clean water and hygiene including hand-washing, is crucial to tackling the future impacts of the COVID-19 crisis including poverty, food insecurity, and economic downturn.

With the introduction of vaccines, importance remains on health and social interventions such as the use of face masks, social distancing, and hand-washing, promoted as of primary importance, albeit in the context of declining water security. The outcomes of the Conference underline the priority of community awareness building, closely related to hygiene and hand-washing programmes, many of which preceded the pandemic; in addition to future strategies and activities that encompass specific needs and challenges brought about in a post-pandemic society.

The distinct impacts of the pandemic, particularly on women, are noted and recorded as a springboard for future, balanced action. Loss of income, domestic violence, an increase in unpaid care-work, malnutrition, and decreased access to education, augment pre-existing systemic barriers to Asian women's participation, development, and leadership.

In effect, the pandemic has served to further marginalise the most vulnerable sections of society, including women. In contrast, the global recognition afforded women Heads of Government in countries such as Denmark, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Taiwan, New Zealand and Slovakia, where we have seen effective management of pandemic responses, highlights the potential of women when empowered within environments that have succeeded in overcoming structural barriers. It must be remembered that worldwide only 20 countries currently have female Heads of Government.

Recognising the urgency of pandemic decision-making, parallel, somewhat compartmentalised streams of thought and action may accentuate and widen the gap between on-ground reality and high-level decision-making. Such division may exacerbate existent silo thinking and threatens to limit collaboration amongst players in the water sector. Increased dependence on internet-based decision-making risks further isolating and marginalising communities on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Given this new, fragmented reality, conference organisers themselves learned the value of adaptation and resilience, and propose an action-oriented and resilience-led 'Way Forward' based on the cultural norms and needs of Asian communities, to be operationalised in a short space of time, to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and targets.



Policymaking that remains dependent on feedback from predominantly privileged groups, is sure to hamper the achievement of global goals.

Many of the issues raised during the Women, Water, Climate Conference webinars, show up consistently within the water and climate fora and have done so historically, since the enunciation of the Dublin Rio Principles in 1992.

Awareness, Advocacy, and Action, a strategy adopted by both Soroptimist International and NetWwater, (member organisations of the Women for Water Partnership), remain three pillars to effect change in attitudes, mindset, and behaviour at local, regional, and international levels and as such, long-term investment in this strategy is essential to making sustainable investments in the sphere of Action.

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*'Collective action, multilateralism, and development cooperation are watchwords for the new era of women facing additional COVID related challenges within the reality of seeking water security in a climate-stressed world.'*



## STEPS FORWARD

*The Way Forward suggests taking a decisive step forward in promoting a gold standard in the water and climate sector by operationalising the following key principles in all women, climate and water programmes, projects, and activities:*

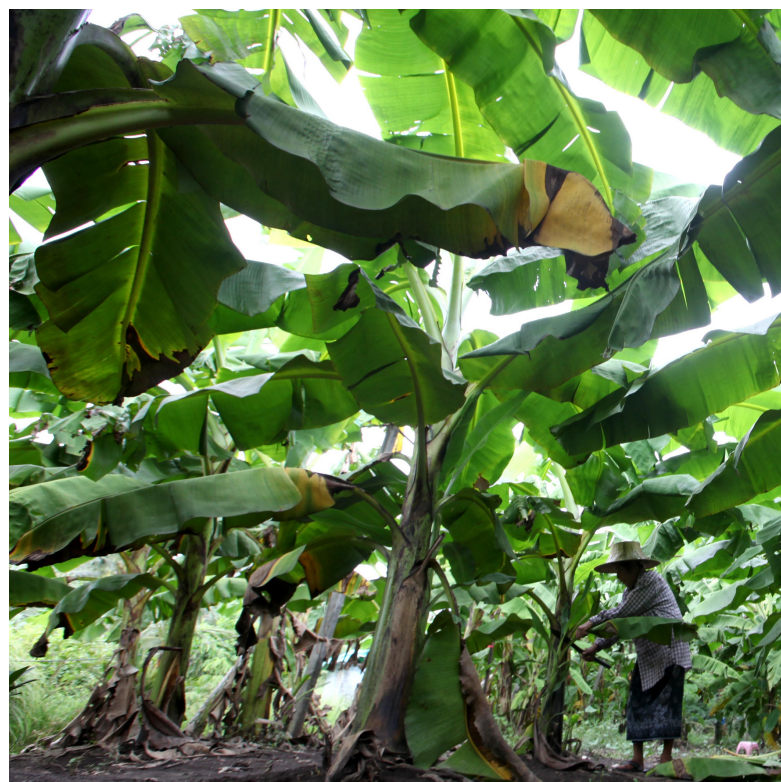
Infrastructure projects need to be designed with parallel investment for developing human resources - donors and governments should allocate funds to involve women groups from the project design stage. Capacity building programmes for women and men need to be embedded in all infrastructure-related projects, especially in WASH and irrigation sectors;

Partnership building for stakeholder platforms, networking opportunities for constructing horizontal and vertical linkages, building intersectoral understanding and empathy, has to precede the project design stage;

Formal recognition at all levels of women's contribution in unpaid care and domestic work (valued to be 10 and 39 percent of the global Gross Domestic Product), and unpaid work in farming, tending livestock, gathering water and fuel is increasing;

Women need to be engaged at all levels in climate-related decision making from the start. According to UN Women, 67 percent of positions in climate-related decision-making are occupied by men;

Therefore, developing a catchment-based planning approach would help incorporate the ground level reality through a community and gender perspective.



### *1. Urgently seeking increased investment in women's involvement in the climate and water sector*

Webinars and speakers strongly emphasised a need for direct investment in women at community and professional levels to reach their full potential. As states focus on the burgeoning needs of the pandemic, climate-related investment in development finance is at risk of being pushed to the side-lines; with governments focusing predominantly on the immediate needs of their COVID-stricken economies.

An awareness and advocacy campaign supporting women in the water sector in cooperation with the conference collaborating partners is needed at this critical juncture, when donor priorities may be deflected from the climate and water sector. World leaders must not let this happen.



The United Nations (UN) General Secretary António Guterres has called for 50 percent of the total share of climate finance provided by all developed countries and multilateral development banks to be allocated towards adaptation and resilience. According to the UN Adaptation GAP report released January 2021, \$300 billion may be required by developing countries to meet their adaptation plans; this figure may even rise to \$500 billion in 2030. What part of these future allocations, critical to the well-being of communities, will be directed to women at the grassroots level and the women's organisations which support them?

The Climate Adaptation Summit, January 2021, in the Netherlands will unlock the finance to drive the gender cognisant, climate-related adaptation support required for the 'Way Forward' action. Collective pressure needs to be brought to bear by the consortium on mainstream donors and bilateral agencies, development banks, and international organisations through a two-tier initial advocacy programme bringing together donors and politicians. Private sector involvement should be encouraged as a supportive element.

## *2. Supporting Inclusion and meaningful participation of women at all levels of decision-making*

Too often women's nominal participation has been accepted as a norm in promoting claims of gender inclusion in the water sector. In Asia, conservative mores still hamper full participation and active representation of the needs of women in water and climate issues, even when they may be physically present in meetings. Many gender-sensitive social auditors circumvent this by having separate male and female groups. Sometimes there is not enough project funding for this type of extension work. An opportunity for women's voices is not merely a silent presence in a room. Often further field level work is necessary to delve into the actual underlying women's issues and challenges.



All webinars highlighted the efforts made by women-led organisations to promote women-led decision-making at the community level. This was seen as successful to some measure, but also highlighted a need for structural change. At the same time, it is necessary to engage with both men and women if issues of supporting gender equality are to be successfully addressed. Experience has shown that community women's groups who may voice their concerns about water security at ground level protests, are often sidelined in the formal decision-making fora.

Women are disproportionately affected by climate change and related water insecurity, and need to be involved at all levels of decision-making, from planning and design to implementation, supervision and monitoring. Special efforts and financial allocations are needed to reach women from marginalised communities and groups. However, not enough climate and water sector investments are currently available to study and comprehend, let alone overcome the structural flaws which act as a barrier to the goal.

The role of gender-sensitive groups and women-led organisations in Asia in creating effective links between science, expertise, and communities cannot be understated. Many Asian women's communities and groups tend to be conservative in thought and perceptions despite increased access to education. Religious and cultural norms may also be seen to constrain women's access to resources and opportunities in the water sector.

The role of women as unpaid caregivers is highlighted with the demands of the pandemic. Their increased time in dealing with pandemic-related needs is at the cost of their increased involvement in small-scale enterprises and agriculture-based livelihoods, as clearly highlighted in webinars from Indonesia and India. The impact of food insecurity on families, girl's education, underage marriage, the health needs of the elderly and children, is beginning to emerge as a possible long-term negative impact on the SDGs. Post pandemic water and climate activities need to focus on women's identified needs.

### *3. Asian women water professionals as a critical conduit for awareness and advocacy*

Women Water Professionals (WWPs) working in both State, university, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors, are an essential conduit between conservative Asian communities and agencies, especially in awareness programmes related to sensitive issues such as WASH and Menstrual Health Management (MHM). Women leaders in private agencies and corporates through their networks and connections can be a source of support as role models if they promote gender cognisant programmes. There is a need for gender sensitisation programmes for the water bureaucracy if women are to be allowed in the corridors of power.



As much as technical and managerial skills are needed for building the capacity of WWPs (especially in the fields of change management and risk management), psychosocial counseling to build communication skills and confidence is essential. Strong oversight from donors and governments is needed to formulate institutional arrangements; a reflection of prevailing societal norms, to include women as important decision-makers in water governing bodies, and community women's leadership in water management.

### *4. The role of social auditors and community mediators*

All case studies discussed the persistent inequality and inequity in water quality and quantity, particularly amongst marginalised communities, and highlighted the need to explore women's roles, responsibilities, and relationships in water within the context of social relationships. The webinars highlighted the positive impacts of mediating NGOs and civil society groups to provide vulnerable rural communities with access to water and sanitation. The presence of social auditors as a community catalyst, working alongside community groups in awareness and advocacy, leading internal discussions within communities, and initiating dialogue with external partners on prevailing norms, is necessary to build a gender-sensitive leadership. This is especially evident in involving younger women, strengthening existent women's groups, and initiating networking between men and women.



## 5. A need for sex-disaggregated data

The lack of sex-disaggregated data has long been seen as a key disadvantage to moving forward a gender-sensitive agenda. The UNESCO WWAP presentation on Day 2 of the conference emphasised this aspect. In the climate and water sector, affected as it is by pandemic related issues with its rapid ground level changes, sound data is needed for policymaking and also to enhance community awareness and advocacy with policymakers. However, the lack of agencies to generate ground-level data is closely linked to the minimal levels of financial investment. Sound data calls for sound investment. Intra-household information, emphasising qualitative data against the quantitative, is essential to provide a base for gender-sensitive decision-making.



## 6. An enhanced role for Young Water Professionals

The role of the young water professionals (YWP) has been specifically recognised and underlined by conference organisers who placed a YWP as an expert discussant in each webinar. In many fora, YWP contributions are stand-alone sessions or panels, but in this conference, YWPs were integrated into the main discourse, presenting observations and views critical to a 'Way Forward' in a future scenario where youth will be the main decision-makers. Their role in building bridges between policy, science, and communities, supporting community-centric evidence-based decision-making in water and climate is well recognised, and will be an important feature of the 'Way Forward'.

In Asia, often the reverence for seniority as a cherished value can hamper the involvement of youth and hinder opportunities for capacity building. The development of a new generation of gender-sensitive YWPs through exposure to advocacy programmes and changes in curricula can be an effective tool to support the development of women's empowerment related activities and leadership programmes for community youth.

## 7. Equal access to capacity-building and control of resources

Enhanced access to basic needs such as water and sanitation is essential to improve the position of women, freeing up time for education, participation in political or governing organisations, and/or economic activities. This long-standing recognition is not always matched with the necessary investment to support such programmes. Stereotypical preconceptions about the sex defined roles of men and women continue to stand in the way of accessing capacity-building support. In some cases, women are facing sextortion for accessing water or seeking maintenance of water systems.

The UNESCO WWAP presentation at the Conference stressed the importance of vocational training for women and youth; the webinars on Indonesia and Malaysia emphasising the catalytic impact of the capacity-building initiatives in creating livelihood opportunities and improved acceptance for women within these communities. The positive impacts of capacity-building programmes in helping Asian women overcome constraints in accessing education and vocational training, is well highlighted in the webinars and provide lessons learned.

## 8. A role for citizen science in generating supportive data

The Conference Keynote speaker presented the value of 'Toad's Eye' science versus 'Eagle Eye' science, highlighting a need to balance both streams. Citizen's science generated data was seen to be as valuable as much as the data generated by the scientific community, especially in the fast-changing climate-related ground reality. Bioindicators of climate change, long understood by indigenous communities are beginning to be recognised in scientific fora too. Therefore, interactive two-way learning sessions and outreach sessions with grassroots activists must be part of the project proposal formulation process. The complementarity of scientific knowledge by professionals with indigenous technical knowledge needs to be recognised and blended into climate and water-related decision making.

## 9. An enhanced role for the private sector

Post pandemic, the private sector has become recognised globally as a strategic development partner with sustainability being increasingly important as an investment factor. Two of the conference webinars, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, presented community activities supported by private sector entities. The follow-up Jala Yatra programmes are already involving the banking sector. The potential to achieve sustainable development, particularly through involvement in projects in SDGs 3, 5, 6, 10, 13, and 17 can be a niche for linking with the corporate sector. Blended funding needs to be explored with intersectoral partnership building; good governance and integrity within the water sector are needed to attract private sector investment.



## 10. The role of champions

The importance of champions at all levels is needed to support structural changes, gender-sensitive policy-making, and investment. This is important across community groups, the bureaucracy, and civil society. This was highlighted in the World Water Forum 2 'From Vision to Action' (Hague 2000) in the Netherlands which generated a lot of debate through its 'Water Vision for the Future' and the associated 'Framework for Action'. These dealt with related issues of state and ownership of water resources, their development potential, management, financing models, and their impact on poverty, social, cultural and economic development and the environment.

The Hague Ministerial Declaration identified meeting basic water needs, securing food supply, protecting ecosystems, sharing water resources, managing risks, valuing water, and governing water wisely as the key challenges for our direct future. The importance of accessing high-level political decision-makers as highlighted in the Hague World Water Forum 2, cannot be underestimated; particularly in formulating national investment in women's water security issues by formulating a water safety net.



# Conclusion

The lack of respect of the coronavirus for the wealth and power of nations is a reminder that we are in the critical, post-COVID run-up to the SDG completion in 2030. COVID-19 may not be the only disaster to be faced in the future as it impacts the SDGs in multiple ways. A world that was unprepared for COVID-19 needs to be aware of long-term threats as much as current pressing issues.

Now more than ever, resilience building through mutual support and solidarity, through strong prior networking, and advanced investment of broad stakeholder platforms, is essential to face up to future challenges. Investment to support this process has to be made available by donors, both corporate and state agencies with the pandemic providing added urgency. Business as usual, with less than 3 percent of funding being allocated for water-related climate change projects is not a mantra that will work any longer. Particularly in a post-pandemic era, with our planet already in crisis.

The Resolution of the General Assembly adopted 21 December 2020, recognises the critical role of water for health, well-being and development, and 'notes with concern' 'the current difficulties faced in meeting the SDG goals. The time for complacency is now past. Unless the spotlight is turned to the empowerment of women and girls who make up 51 percent of humanity, and global attention is focused on effectively supporting this specific group with speed and adequate interventions backed by financial support, reaching the SDG goals will be a seismic task.

Women and men, community members, political decision-makers and water agencies, collectively need to devise a new integrated 'Way Forward'. They should face the future with a firm will and commitment, unshackled by the past and its watered-down policies; working towards resilience based on good networking and timely financial support. The collective which was brought together for this activity needs to take the lead in making this critical step forward, an achievable reality.



*The Way Forward which calls for a fundamental and systemic change by installing a gender cognisant socio-institutional model, needs the collective strength of champions from all sectors behind it.*

*"A vision without action is a daydream, action without vision is a nightmare."*

# The Way Forward



Thanks to our sponsors, speakers and all those who attended the Women, Water, Climate Conference. We look forward to working with you on our next project, to implement the Way Forward solutions

[www.womenforwater.org](http://www.womenforwater.org)  
[president@womenforwater.org](mailto:president@womenforwater.org)



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