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Gender and Water Dynamics in Iraq:

Towards Inclusive and Sustainable Water Responses



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1. Introduction

Across Iraqi society, clean and affordable water access underpins critical services that sustain people’s lives and livelihoods. While water scarcity and pollution bring about a cascade of challenges and threats, and aggravate existing problems, these issues do not affect all demographic groups in the same way. Women are often disproportionately impacted by water-related threats, largely due to socially-constructed norms and behaviors that shape and consolidate structural and institutional discrimination and inequalities against women. This makes the experiences and needs of women rather different, and limits their resilience capacity against water-related stresses, which include the loss of livelihood, intensified care work, and the need to migrate, among others. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to provide an unprecedented exploratory analysis the gender-water nexus in Iraq⁽¹⁾, with the purpose of starting a conversation on the intersection between gender and water scarcity across different demographic groups and spatiality in Iraq, using intriguing specialized and in-depth research. In doing this, the paper will: 1) present an overview of the drivers of water scarcity and pollution in Iraq, 2) provide an exploratory analysis of gender-water dynamics in Iraq, shedding light on six concrete examples, and 3) infer recommendations on how to integrate a gender lens in water-related policies and responses and how to transform water-related threats into opportunities for advancing gender equality and women empowerment.

(1) Based on the literature review conducted for this paper and to the knowledge of the author, this area of research (water-gender dynamics in Iraq) is extremely under researched and a knowledge gap persists.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on thorough desk research and a literature review of water scarcity and its related threats in Iraq, gender norms and constructions, gender-based discrimination and inequalities across the Iraqi society, as well as linkages and synergies between environment and gender across different contexts within the Global South. Moreover, a number of focus groups and expert interviews were conducted to better contextualize the paper and assess its findings. These included interviews with female lawyers, academics, male and female farmers, and human rights activists, particularly from southern Iraq.

3. An Overview of Water Scarcity in Iraq

Over the last three decades, the environmental situation in Iraq has continuously deteriorated. In 2018, the Iraqi federal government indicated that the water flowing through the Euphrates and Tigris - the country's main water resources - has shrunk by 30 percent since the 1980s. This trend is expected to continue, reaching a decrease in water discharge by up to 50 percent by 2030⁽²⁾. Likewise, the overall water supply is expected to decrease by up to 60 percent between

2015-2025⁽³⁾. The shrinking availability of water and inaccessibility to affordable and potable water is driven by a myriad of inter-related factors. This section will provide a succinct overview of the main drivers behind Iraq's water scarcity.

3.1. Corruption and Water Mismanagement

Despite the growing evidence of the destabilizing impact of water scarcity, the Iraqi government has failed to effectively manage water scarcity and its associated threats. This inefficacy towards implementing a comprehensive water management plan, improving the water infrastructure and providing a waste-free water system is partly driven by the prolonged negligence, corruption and nepotism from the side of the government. Field records from Basra, Al Diwaniyah and Nasiriyah indicated that there are personal farms and illegal fish fields owned by politicians that depend entirely on water stolen through artificial tributaries or underground pipelines⁽⁴⁾. Compounding this, the agriculture sector continues to use outdated and wasteful water practices, and the country's sewage system is highly dysfunctional, which severely damages the quality of the water.

(2) Dockx, Pieter-Jan. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2019, Water Scarcity in Iraq: From Inter-Tribal Conflicts to Water Disputes, www.ipcs.org/issue_briefs/issue_brief_pdf/ipcssr203_contested%20waters%20project_water%20scarcity%20in%20iraq_p%20jan-dockx_may%202019.pdf.

(3) More than Infrastructures: Water Challenges in Iraq. Report. July 2018. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/more-infrastructures-water-challenges-iraq>.

(4) Sulaiman, Khaled. Water Guards - Drought and Climate Change in Iraq. Al-Mada, 2020. P.49

3.2. Transboundary Water Tensions Between Riparian States (Turkey, Iran and Syria) and Iraq

Measures and decisions taken by riparian countries - Turkey, Iran and Syria – are prime contributing factors to Iraq’s shrinking availability of surface water. The conflicts over the utilization and distribution of Euphrates and Tigris water resources date back to the 1970s, when each riparian country embarked, unilaterally, on projects for building dams and water infrastructures. Turkey has established its position as a regional hydro-hegemon, exploiting opportunities across Syria and Iraq to strengthen its control over critical water sources and control water levels to its favor. Most significantly, Turkey is implementing a grand project of water infrastructure building, called the Southeastern Anatolian Development Project (GAP), which includes the construction of 22 dams, 19 hydroelectric power plants and an extensive irrigation network. The filling of the Ilisu dam reservoir has the potential of reducing the water flow to the Tigris river by 50 percent⁽⁵⁾. While Ankara reinforces its right to achieve its development ambitions, by intensifying energy generation and providing job opportunities, this will pose serious threats to Iraq’s water resources, agriculture sector and livelihood opportunities. Despite the potency of hydro-politics in jeopardizing Iraq’s water resources, there is no legally-binding and comprehensive water management agreement that brings together Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq to organize and manage the

(5) Ibid, 4.

equitable and sustainable sharing of Tigris and Euphrates⁽⁶⁾.

3.3. The Weaponization of Water

Another important factor that has contributed to the deterioration of Iraq’s water resources is the instrumentalization of water infrastructure to consolidate power, punish opponents and delegitimize political rivalries. In 1991, Saddam Hussein’s regime diverted the rivers’ flow and dried out the Marshes in Southern Iraq as a strategy for weakening his political opponents and consolidating his power over the Marsh Arabs. The drainage of the Marshes had devastating impacts on the Marsh Arabs community.

The absence of water has constrained the role of women in society, which traditionally included collecting reeds, raising water buffalo and other livestock, producing milk, cheese and yoghurt, and making handicrafts. Records also suggest that women are no longer passing traditional knowledge to younger generations, largely due to the disruption of these activities⁽⁷⁾. When Saddam Hussein was toppled by the 2003 US invasion, local communities across Amarah, Basra and Nasiriyah destroyed the dams, allowing the water to flow again

(6) Webinar “Iraq: Climate, Water & Conflict in 2020”. August 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnGtEMPEXDM&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=ClingendaelInstitute.

(7) Minority Rights Group International, 2019, *Minority and Indigenous Trends*. Available at: minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2019_MR_Report_170x240_V7_WEB.pdf.

towards the Marshes. However, regional dam building, droughts and harmful irrigation practices have obstructed the flow of water at its usual rates⁽⁸⁾. Likewise, ISIL (Islamic State for Iraq and the Levant) exerted control over critical water resources and key water infrastructure to further its political and strategic goals and advance its territorial expansion strategy. This was manifested in two ways. First, ISIL controlled dams by holding water behind them, diverting water flows and temporarily cutting off supplies, which led to the drainage of certain communities. In parallel, it released water at dams and caused flooding to drown government-controlled territories or impede the movement of government troops. Second, ISIL contaminated water resources, rendering them unsuitable for drinking, agriculture and livestock farming⁽⁹⁾. The utilization of water resources as a military tactic or battlefield weapon has had devastating consequences on Iraq's water infrastructure. The Ministry of Water Resources estimates the cost of direct damages to hydraulic infrastructure at USD 600 million⁽¹⁰⁾.

3.4. Climate Change: a magnifier of water-related threats in Iraq

Given its unique hydrological limitations, Iraq is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change impacts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, particularly due to its arid and downstream location. Throughout the last decades, the country has witnessed rising temperatures, variability and unpredictability of rainfall precipitation, which has caused recurrent droughts (1998-2000 & 2007-2009), heat waves and erratic rainfall⁽¹¹⁾. Iraq depends on precipitation outside of its borders for half of its water supply. This makes it highly vulnerable to changes in precipitation levels. Moreover, the low water level in Southern Iraq coupled with sea-level rise in the Persian Gulf has led to the intrusion of soil in Shatt El Arab and groundwater resources, increasing the salinity of water and causing serious damages to the surrounding lands⁽¹²⁾. Flash floods, droughts and extreme weather events put additional stress on Iraq's dilapidated water infrastructure, which negatively impacts industries and livelihoods activities, increases the risk of food insecurity and water-borne diseases, and disrupts education and healthcare services⁽¹³⁾.

(8) Solomon, Erika, and Laura Pitel. «Why Water Is a Growing Faultline between Turkey and Iraq.» July 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/82ca2e3c-636911-e890-c29563-a0613e56>; *ibid*, 4, p.4950-

(9) Von Lossov, Tobbias. THE ROLE OF WATER IN THE SYRIAN AND IRAQI CIVIL WARS. Report. May 2020. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/role-water-syrian-and-iraqi-civil-wars>.

(10) Environmental Issues in Areas Retaken from Isil Mosul, Iraq. Report. 2017. <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/publication/environmental-issues-areas-retaken-isil-mosul-iraq-technical-note>.

(11) Hassan, Kawa, Camilla Born, and Pernilla Nordqvist. Iraq: Climate-related Security Risk Assessment. Report. 2018. <https://www.preventionweb.net/publications/view/61579>.

(12) Fact Sheet: Climate Change in Iraq. Report. Accessed 2012. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Climate change In Iraq Fact sheet - English.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Climate%20change%20In%20Iraq%20Fact%20sheet%20-%20English.pdf).

(13) *Ibid* 4, p.77

3.5. Macro-Trends: insecurity, population growth, urbanization and economic stress

Understanding Iraq's water scarcity and its associated threats requires an assessment of the broader political, security and socio-economic context, where all of these systems interact against the backdrop of post-conflict reconstruction and development. In the security landscape, Iraq has engaged in a prolonged conflict with terrorist organizations, namely ISIL. The country is characterized by political instability and fragmentation, inter-sectarian tensions, regional rivalries and superpower hegemony (Iran-US, Turkey-Kurds, Iran-Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran)⁽¹⁴⁾. On the humanitarian front, there are approximately 1.4 million internally displaced persons and 4.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Iraq⁽¹⁵⁾. The loss of livelihoods and disruption of basic needs due to water deterioration is influencing migration dynamics and intensifying internal displacement, particularly in Southern Iraq. Additionally, the Iraqi population is expected to reach 50 million by 2030, while in 2050 it is estimated that it will have increased to 80 million people⁽¹⁶⁾. This means that water demands will continue to increase in the coming decades. Compounding this, Iraq is highly dependent on oil revenues, accounting for more than 90 percent of government revenues, making it

highly vulnerable to international oil price shocks and fluctuations. For instance, the government's 2020 budget was prepared on an assumption of \$56 per barrel, while prices in 2020 dropped to an average of \$ 30/ barrel, largely due to the economic repercussions of COVID-19 pandemic⁽¹⁷⁾. Furthermore, around 70 percent of Iraq's population resides in urban areas, and the rate of urbanization is expected to increase annually by 3 percent⁽¹⁸⁾. Additionally, water-related threats can exacerbate rural-urban migration patterns and increase demands on urban water systems.

4. The Differentiated Impact of Water Scarcity on Women and Men in Iraq

The convergence of these factors has severely deteriorated Iraq's water resources, which has led to the loss of livelihoods, economic stress, disruption of health and educational services, spread of water-borne diseases, and internal migration, among other issues. However, while water-related threats are pronounced across the Iraqi society, their impacts are far from universal: water scarcity and its associated threats have important gender

(14) Ibid 10

(15) «Iraq.» OCHA. August 19, 2020. Accessed October 17, 2020. <https://www.unocha.org/iraq>.

(16) Ibid 06

(17) IMPACT OF THE OIL CRISIS AND COVID-19 ON IRAQ'S FRAGILITY. Report. United Nations Development Programme in Iraq. August 2020.

(18) «Iraq Urbanization.» Iraq Urbanization - Demographics. Accessed October 17, 2020. <https://www.indexmundi.com/iraq/urbanization.html>.

dimensions that shape how women and men experience and cope with these problems. Gender is understood as “the social (rather than biological) attributes, norms, roles and attitudes considered appropriate for groups of men and women by a given society at a given point in time and learned through socialization. Gender shapes and reinforces power relations between and among these different groups⁽¹⁹⁾.” Accordingly, women and men experience water-related threats differently, women being disproportionately impacted. Women face a multitude of structural and institutional barriers, including sexual and gender-based violence, restricted mobility, and confinement to traditional gender roles – to mention a few – that not only shape their experiences but constrain their ability to cope and withstand stresses and shocks, in comparison with their male counterparts. However, women are not a homogenous group; the diversity among them is due to the intersection of gender with other identity-makers, such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, education, religion and so on. These identities and affiliations overlap and interact with one another forming a complex and unique identity of different groups of women⁽²⁰⁾. This elucidates that extensive research is required to fully grasp gender-water dynamics across groups of women with

different identity constructions in the Iraqi society. This section aims to provide initial insights on gender-water dynamics in the Iraqi society by laying out six concrete examples, as follows:

4.1. Women Are Prime Managers of Water at The Household Level

The management of scarce water resources on the household level puts additional burdens on women and increases the likelihood of intra-family disputes and domestic violence. In southern Iraq, local populations suffer from severe water scarcity and water pollution. In many of the homes, there is no running water. Accordingly, family members purchase water from multiple sources to secure their basic water needs for drinking, cooking and cleaning. An anecdote from a woman living in Nasiriyah indicated that although her home is close to the center of the city, she would have to call the local water services to come with water tanks and fill the water reservoir of her building on a weekly basis. She indicated that while the governmental service is supposed to pass by periodically and transport water free of charge, she would have to call and pay 5,000 Iraqi Dinar (4.20 USD) for each water tanker, otherwise she would be out of water for days. This water is used for cleaning purposes, including bathing and washing of clothes, but it is not suitable for drinking or cooking, given that it is of poor quality⁽²¹⁾. Accordingly, women

(19) Gender, Climate and Security: Sustaining Inclusive Peace on the Frontlines of Climate Change. Report. June 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/gender-climate-and-security-en.pdf?la=en&vs=215>.

(20) Ibid 18

(21) Focus group conducted with Ms. Fadwa Tawama, Iman Khedr, Amal Hussein and Abullah Al-Anzi on 17 October 2020.

from Nasiriyah, similar to many cities in the South, are required to buy water with better quality from purification stations to use it for drinking along with bottled water. Water accessibility is considerably better for households in Northern and Central Iraq where running water is available, such as Baghdad, while the situation is significantly worse for women and communities that live in informal urban settlements or remote areas (Check Box 01).

Aside from managing the purchase of water and the financial burden that it poses, women are primarily responsible for managing this scarce water inside the household and for ensuring that it is being consumed carefully while searching for ways to reuse and recycle it. This requires increased household work for women, where they have to sort and carry water in order to fill the containers. This situation increases household pressures on women and negatively affects their well-being, particularly in the hot summer where the temperature might exceed 50 degrees Celsius. With this in mind, water scarcity and its associated risks increase the likelihood of intra-family disputes and domestic violence, particularly spousal violence. Data shows that one in five women (21%) in Iraq aged 15 - 49 has suffered physical violence at the hands of the husband⁽²²⁾. These are the official numbers, but the actual rate of violence is likely to be much higher. This situation becomes compounded when families have

to deal with urgent and concurrent problems. For instance, numbers indicate that domestic violence cases have increased by an average of 30% since the coronavirus pandemic has hit Iraq and curfew was put in place⁽²³⁾. This suggests that emerging threats, including health or water-related threats, are often aggravators of gender-based violence.

Box 01: Women's Daily Journey for Water Transport in Al-Burwaished Village

Every day, Um Ali (35 years old) along with the women of Al-Burwaished village travel for around three kilometers, back and forth two to three times a day, to bring clean water - water free of salt and sulfur - to their families. At dawn, each woman carries a large pot above her head and walks towards the nearest river. They make this journey again at noon and before sunset to collect water for their household use and for bathing their children. Women would take turns to fetch water from the river or to bathe in it (without using soap, given that it doesn't foam because of the murky water). It is important to note that the available water doesn't meet the daily needs of the whole village. Additionally, women from surrounding villages would also come to the banks of the river – named by the local community “Al-Besrukeya”

(22) «Violence Against Women in Iraq Fact Sheet.» November 2010. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4cf4a67d2.pdf>.

(23) «Spike in Domestic Abuse Cases Hits Iraq:» The Arab Weekly. April 2020. Accessed October 30, 2020. <https://thearabweekly.com/spike-domestic-abuse-cases-hits-iraq>.

– to wash their utensils. They also cover each other with robes to bath in between canes. In this way, the women use some of their daily water needs at the source, saving some water from being transported back home.

The village of Al-Burwaishid, which is affiliated to Al-Badir district in Al-Diwaniyah Governorate (200 km south of the capital Baghdad), inhabits about 700 people, the majority of whom are women and children. Houses and silos for storing grain and food are constructed of mud-brick by the hands of women, girls and children, while men provide mineral drinking water from the city of Al-Badir, which is 60 km away.

This story has been reproduced from an article on the impact of drought and bullous disease on women and children, written by Tahsin Al-Zerqany. Available at: <https://daraj.com/32784/>

4.2. Water-Induced Migration is Often Shaped By Gender Considerations

The scarcity of water as well as land degradation have jeopardized the rural livelihoods of many families across Southern Iraq. This has triggered the internal migration of rural communities; these migration patterns are often shaped by gender considerations and have different implications on women and men. Basra, Missan and Thi-Qar – the three southernmost governorates of Iraq – have witnessed the highest number of water-induced internal displacement throughout the

past decade. In some villages, particularly in Thi-Qar, up to half of the homes were abandoned⁽²⁴⁾. In rural communities, women are responsible for taking care of household chores, but they also engage in subsistence agriculture. Male farmers work in agriculture fields, particularly wheat and barley, while women perform unpaid farming activities in nearby groves. This includes the collection of dates and the planting of vegetables, such as mint, parsley, celery, eggplant, okra and green pepper. These products are usually sold in the village's market to provide a small income for the family. Unlike the seasonality of agricultural crops, these groves are suitable for planting throughout the year. However, many of these groves have been damaged due to water scarcity. Additionally, the precarity of the water situation, namely the changing availability of water throughout the years, has disincentivized farmers to invest in their lands and forced many to move, including female farmers⁽²⁵⁾. Evidence shows that there is diversity across the migration patterns of rural communities. On one hand, rural families do move to other rural communities. Data from the International Organization of Migration (IOM) suggests that most families displaced by Iraq's water crisis in 2019 moved from one rural area to another, nearly a quarter of whom moved to other villages. Social capital, including family and tribal connections,

(24) Guiu, Roger. No Matter of Choice: Displacement in a Changing Climate. Report. February 2020. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/202002-iraq-slow-onset-report.pdf>.

(25) Ibid 20

is a significant factor in shaping families' decision to move, largely on the basis of livelihood opportunities. Social capital is usually a critical factor in shaping people's ability to cope and adapt with challenges, and in patriarchal societies, men are often placed in more favorable and better-connected positions. On the other hand, many other families move to urban areas, and usually reside on the outskirts of urban clusters or in lands that are registered as agricultural. For instance, in Dawaya Center, two new neighborhoods have emerged over the last decade⁽²⁶⁾.

In some cases, men move to urban cities in search of better economic opportunities, while women and children stay behind. In other cases, women and children travel with their husbands and reside together in their new home⁽²⁷⁾. In Baghdad, men usually join security institutions, including military and police, or carry out precarious daily labor, such as garbage sorting and the selling of recyclable materials. Traditionally, women are expected to stay home and conduct household chores, but the stressful economic situation and the absence of the 'breadwinner', due to the protracted conflict, has forced many women to search for a source of income, conducting informal daily labor, in addition to garbage sorting activities. While it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of female-headed households (FHHs), figures indicate that 1 in 10 Iraqi

households is headed by a woman⁽²⁸⁾. An anecdote from a female lawyer living in Baghdad has explained that throughout the last decade Baghdad has become a hotspot for "in-migration", including farmers. However, most of these internal migrants reside in alarmingly growing urban slums and illegal urban settlements. These areas are characterized by violence, gangs and militias, drug smuggling, child trafficking and prostitution. Accordingly, women and children are subject to different forms of direct and structural violence⁽²⁹⁾. Also, the influx of rural migrants into Baghdad poses additional pressures on Baghdad's water facilities. There are records of destruction, diversion and stealing of water by residents of urban slums⁽³⁰⁾. This increases the likelihood of societal tensions and aggravates the notions of violence and insecurities, which women are disproportionately impacted by.

Box 02: El-Tawashat الطواشات (female date collectors) have lost their source of livelihood due to land levelling in Baghdad.

Not so long ago, Iraq was home to the highest number of palm trees in the Arab region. Nowadays, agricultural lands and palm trees in areas next to the Degla river in Baghdad have been leveled for

(26) Ibid 23

(27) Expert Interview with Maha Yassin, Junior Researcher at the Planetary Security Initiative, Clingendael

(28) Nasiri, Murtada. IOM-IRAQ SPECIAL REPORT FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS. Issue brief. February 2020. http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=11876:iom-iraq-special-report-female-headed-households&Itemid=626&lang=en.

(29) Ibid 20

(30) Ibid 20

commercial use by investors and well-connected politicians. The absence of these agricultural lands has hindered the seasonal movement of El-Tawashat (female date collectors) from their rural villages to Baghdad's palm groves to harvest dates and generate income that usually suffices their families for the rest of the year, particularly in the absence of a breadwinner.

El-Tawashat are rural women whose livelihood depends on the season of date harvesting. In the early hours of the morning, El-Tawashat travel to palm groves to collect and sort dates. Given that this is their main and only source of income, women conduct this intense labor despite its precarity. An owner of a palm grove has indicated that this work is conducted exclusively by rural women and girls because they are better able to bear the physical labor required for this work, which is usually arduous and tiring. He added that these women are poor and need to support their families. The protracted conflict in Iraq has widowed many women, which has forced them to search for livelihood opportunities.

Source: Expert interview with Ms. Amal Hussein, Lawyer and Human Rights Activist from Baghdad and an article by Iraq Radio Free: <https://www.iraqhurr.org/a/24840053.html>

4.3. The Intersection Between Gender, Water and Insecurity

Across the Iraqi society, gender, water and

insecurity dynamics come into play, causing a feedback loop and perpetuating direct and structural violence against women. Decades of violence, conflict and political fragmentation have severely worsened the status of Iraqi women in society, reversed hard-won gains and subjected them to many forms of violence. Under ISIL, women have faced kidnapping, extrajudicial killings, rape, slavery, human trafficking and forced marriage to fighters. Also, many women who were directly or indirectly associated with ISIL face stigma and societal rejection, which prevents them from receiving the protection and support they need. Also, domestic violence is ubiquitous in Iraq, largely due to patriarchal constructions and the adherence to customs and traditions, which usually normalizes or justifies such criminal actions. So-called honor crimes, child marriage, trafficking of women and girls and female genital mutilation (FGM) are among other forms of violence against women⁽³¹⁾. There is extensive evidence that conflict landscapes are increasingly being gendered. This means that gender-based violence (e.g., rape, slavery and abduction) or gender associations, such as the association of women with honor and family image, are being instrumentalized for political or military goals, including the exertion of dominance and control over communities and the dehumanization of opponents through the humiliation and traumatization of the

(31) Abed, Anfal. «Violence Against Women in Iraq: Between Practice and Legislation.» Middle East Centre. July 09, 2020. Accessed October 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/202008/07/violence-against-women-in-iraq-between-practice-and-legislation/>.

women of those groups, which often has far-reaching destabilizing effects on these communities⁽³²⁾. Likewise, since the adoption of UNSCR (United Nations Security Council Resolution) 1325 (2000), the case for the disproportionate and differentiated impact of conflicts on women and girls has been strongly proved and evaluated across different conflict situations⁽³³⁾.

Against this backdrop, sexual and gender-based violence interacts or overlaps with water dynamics in three specific ways. First, it reduces the resilience of women to cope, withstand and recover from water-related threats, such as the loss of livelihood, daily mobility of women for the purchase or transport of water, and the search for alternative livelihood opportunities, due to the different forms of harassment and abuse that they are exposed to. For instance, southerner men that have served in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or women that have been forcibly displaced face limited livelihood alternatives given that they can no longer return to their villages because of the precarious and devastating situation of the countryside⁽³⁴⁾. Second, water scarcity and pollution increase the propensity for the

politicization and securitization of water, inter-tribal and inter-ethnic conflicts, societal tensions (e.g. rural-urban migration) and social unrest. For instance, in July 2018, Basra governorate had witnessed a social upheaval against the government, which was triggered by repeated water and electricity shortages in the hot summer months⁽³⁵⁾. The increase of violence and instability that is partly motivated by the scarcity and the pollution of water exacerbate insecurities even further, which does not only hinder the efforts towards the protection of women, but rather aggravates women's vulnerabilities and inequalities. Third, the strongly-rooted cultural violence against women subjects female environmentalists and civil activists to harassment, defamation and stigma. Anecdotes by women activists in Iraq elucidate that the perceptions of honor and gender-based moral associations are a pretext for harassment, violence and even killing of women activists by accusing them of being dishonorable or unethical⁽³⁶⁾.

4.4. Caregiving Activities Are Primarily The Responsibility of Women

Similar to many communities, caregiving activities are primarily the responsibility of women across Iraqi society. Women

(32) United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008). Available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D274-E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF97%D/CAC%20S%20RES%201820.pdf>

(33) United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). Available at: <https://www.peacewomen.org/SCR-1325>

(34) Solomon, Erika, and Laura Pitel. Why Water Is a Growing Faultline between Turkey and Iraq. July 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/82ca2e3c-636911-e890-c29563-a0613e56>.

(35) Mustafa Salim, Liz Sly. «Widespread Unrest Erupts in Southern Iraq amid Acute Shortages of Water, Electricity.» The Washington Post. July 14, 2018. Accessed October 30, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/widespread-unrest-erupts-in-southern-iraq-amid-acute-shortages-of-water-electricity/2018/07/14/b9077b9086-c2-11e89-e064-db52ac42e05_story.html.

(36) Ibid 4

look after the wellbeing of their children and play an integral role in fulfilling their physical, psychosocial and emotional needs⁽³⁷⁾. Accordingly, water-related illness and the disruption of schooling, due to environmentally-related hazards, put additional emotional stresses on women and intensify their care-giving duties. In the summer of 2018, the Basra governorate faced a water crisis, where drinking water became contaminated and many residents didn't have access to potable water. As a consequence, approximately 130,000 people, half of which were children, were hospitalized after contracting water-borne diseases⁽³⁸⁾. Also, the absence of clean water, broken toilets and dry pipes in schools, coupled with overcrowded classrooms, created breeding grounds for diseases and forced many children to drop out of school⁽³⁹⁾. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (2018), more than 277,000 children were at risk of contracting a water-borne disease in schools across Basra, where water and sanitation facilities were severely damaged⁽⁴⁰⁾.

As explained in the first section, Iraq's water crisis is driven by a multitude of factors,

including climate change, which intensifies the prospects of heatwaves, droughts and floods. These climatic hazards cause serious damages to infrastructure, homes, schools and other vital services. For instance, in the spring of 2019, heavy rains and floods hit many regions across Iraq, including Baghdad, causing severe damages to infrastructure and disruptions in water services, which forced some communities to use flood water to meet their basic water needs. This has exacerbated health risks and increased the likelihood of disease spread. The increasing frequency of climate-related natural hazards coupled with water scarcity and dilapidated infrastructure exposes children to a myriad of threats, including illness, school dropouts, and disruption of recreational and sports activities, and increases their need for humanitarian assistance⁽⁴¹⁾. According to the Ministry of Environment in Iraq (2017), women, children and elders are most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change, due to their limited resilience capacity in the face of the health, economic and environmental consequences of climate-related threats⁽⁴²⁾. Field records reveal that poverty due to the loss of agriculture-based livelihoods and food insecurity were push factors for girls to drop out of school, engage in child labor and be forced into child marriage⁽⁴³⁾.

(37) Ibid 4

(38) Baker, Helin. «Clean Water Saves Lives.» Norwegian Refugee Council. November 2019. Accessed October 30, 2020. <https://www.nrc.no/gmm/clean-water-saves-lives/>.

(39) Ibid 36

(40) «Iraq: Basra's Children Face Disease Outbreaks in Rundown Schools.» Norwegian Refugee Council. October 2018. Accessed October 30, 2020. <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/october/iraq-basras-children-face-disease-outbreak-in-rundown-schools/>.

(41) Ibid 4

(42) The Status of the Environment in Iraq. Report. 2017. [http://moen.gov.iq/Portals/0/الواقع البيئي 2017](http://moen.gov.iq/Portals/0/الواقع%20البيئي%202017.pdf).

(43) Ibid 4, p.69

**Box 03: An Investigative Field Visit:
Water Scarcity, Inter-Clan Conflicts,
Disease Spread and Extreme Poverty**

This is an anecdote by Iman Khedr, Agriculture Engineer and Human Rights Activist from Nasiriyah Governorate in Iraq.

As a result of my work in the humanitarian and environmental field in Thi-Qar Governorate, I was once approached by one of the locals while I was conducting fieldwork with one of Thi-Qar's Parliamentarians. This local asked me to pay a visit to one of the villages and inspect the miserable situation of the villagers due to water scarcity. When I asked him why haven't the villagers communicated their problems to the local government, he indicated that they contacted the local government multiple times, but no one has extended a helping hand. Accordingly, I decided to visit the village while being accompanied by the director of the parliamentarian's office and his media officer. When we arrived there, we found the villagers living in extreme poverty and facing serious water shortages.

The villagers complained about water scarcity and lack of access to the river's water as well as to drinking water. They expressed that despite their repeated complaints to the municipality, there were no attempts to solve the water problems facing the village. The municipality would only send vehicles with water barrels; each barrel costs 5,000 Iraqi Dinars, although

the water comes directly from the river without any treatment. The villagers of this area belong to the Bani Al-Assad clan. They abandoned their lands in the 1990s under Saddam's regime due to the drainage of the Marshes. When their lands dried, the Bani Al-Assad clan moved to western governorates and worked in the agriculture sector, but after 2003, they decided to return to their lands in Thi-Qar.

However, they realized that the area is being controlled by powerful clans that are deliberately drying up the lands as a way of pushing them out again. I also visited the women and children of the village, who had red spots on their faces due to water-related skin diseases. It is important to note that when we contacted the Governor and described to him the dire situation of the village, he denied and undermined the situation, framing the problem as a competition between clans over land use. Due to the inaction of the Governor, we resorted to the local environmental administration and they were responsive.

They inspected the village and found out that the river's course has been diverted and water sources were cut off by Al-Jubeir clan who are well-connected politically. Also, they found 250 dead buffalos and others were blind due to prolonged thirst. In response to this, the Ministry of Environment has constructed a desalination unit and returned the riverbed to the village. The inaction towards this dire situation would have led to the destruction of the entire village.

4.5. Girls Are Disproportionately Impacted By The Inadequate Access to Water and Sanitation Services

Damaged and dysfunctional water infrastructure and lack of access to basic sanitation facilities across schools in Iraq, particularly in rural areas, have disproportionately impacted girls. While both girls and boys struggle because of lack of water and appropriate toilets at schools, which forces them to buy bottled water to be able to maintain basic hygiene,⁽⁴⁴⁾ girls face additional hurdles when they have to deal with their monthly menstrual cycle. Although menstruation is a normal biological function of the female body, the societal associations and constructions of it as something shameful, inappropriate and impure, force many girls to skip school to avoid facing social embarrassment and exclusion. Moreover, the absence of clean water and functional toilets at schools makes it difficult for girls to manage their menstruation in a hygienic and private manner. This jeopardizes girls' continued engagement in the educational process. Some girls might even walk to the nearest water source, or resort to neighboring homes to use the toilet⁽⁴⁵⁾, which may increase their exposure to harassment and gender-based violence.

(44) Ibid 4, p.64

(45) Ibid 4, p.60 / «Water, Toilets, Hygiene... and Women's Empowerment.» WaterAid UK. March 2018. Accessed October 30, 2020. <https://www.wateraid.org/uk/blog/water-toilets-hygiene-and-womens-empowerment>.

4.6. Local Communities Are a Valuable Source of Knowledge

While local communities are disproportionately affected by water scarcity and pollution and its associated threats, they provide valuable knowledge on how to sustain ecosystems, preserve scarce water and adapt to this changing environment. Given their proximity to nature and their integral role in the management and provision of water, local women are a vital source for innovation and for devising “nature-based solutions”⁽⁴⁶⁾. A field visit conducted by Khaled Suleiman to Sumar town, located about 30 kilometers north of Diwaniyah city, provides a vivid example of a local woman's knowledge of climate change and water pollution and her utilization of innovative tools to adapt her land to the changing climatic conditions. Halimah al-Sawady, a farmer and breadwinner from Sumar town, works in the field on a daily basis to provide for four families, who depend entirely on the agricultural land for their sustenance. Over the past years, Halimah has been suffering because of water scarcity and climate change, where summers are increasingly hot and prolonged, while winters are short but fraught with heavy rains and floods. For three decades, Halimah has been working closely on the land. While she has had limited education, Halimah uses scientific facts and surfs through her phone

(46) Ibid, 4/ «'Water Guards': New Book on Environmental Stresses in Iraq.» Planetary Security Initiative. July 28, 2020. Accessed October 30, 2020. <https://www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org/news/water-guards-new-book-environmental-stresses-iraq>.

for online knowledge on climate change, water pollution and agriculture, to innovate solutions that are directly inspired by her contact and intimate understanding of nature. Over the last years, droughts and scarcity of groundwater have forced Halimah to search for unconventional irrigation methods, so she adopted a drip irrigation system, which she received from the local agriculture department. Additionally, when she realized that modern agriculture practices, such as adding ripening agents, were a cause of disease spread, namely cancer, she decided to switch to organic fertilizers. Similarly, Halimah employs traditional practices, such as the use of garlic to treat aphids, which has the potential of destroying crops⁽⁴⁷⁾. Moreover, women are well-positioned to bequeath traditional knowledge about nature, agricultural and water management practices to their children and the younger generations. Given their close proximity to their children, women can also play an integral role in embedding environmentally sustainable values into their children and raise awareness about the local impacts of water scarcity and climate change and the means to adapt to these new conditions across the community.

Box 04: Key Trends: Water and Gender

The following is a non-exhaustive list of the most common gender-water trends in the global south and rural communities.

(47) This field visit was conducted by Khaled Suleiman, an Iraqi writer and journalist. The full story is available on this link: <https://daraj.com/en/42857/>

Further research is required to better contextualize, assess and evaluate these trends in Iraqi society, while keeping in mind the intersectionality approach and other variables that interact or overlap with gender constructions.

1. Women are the prime collectors and transporters of water across rural communities. In Africa, 90 percent of the work of gathering water and wood, for the household and for food preparation, is conducted by women. On average, women and children travel 10-15 kilometers per day to collect water and fill up to 15 liters per trip⁽⁴⁸⁾.
2. Girls are more likely to skip school and dropout of education when their homes are located far away from a water source. This is due to their engagement in water collection activities, which could take up to 4-5 hours a day.
3. Inadequate access to safe, hygienic and private sanitation facilities is a source of physical discomfort and insecurity for millions of women across the world. Due to societal stigma and shaming, women often leave their homes before dawn or after nightfall to maintain privacy when using a toilet or open defecation site, while girls skip school when they are menstruating.
4. Women face a multitude of health problems due to their transport of water barrels and tanks or carrying pots over their heads. Health issues include fatigue, spinal and pelvic deformities and reproductive

(48) Facts about Women and Water. 2004. http://www.gender.cawater-info.net/what_is/facts_e.htm.

health problems, such as spontaneous abortions⁽⁴⁹⁾.

5. Women are most often responsible for the management of water resources on the household level and in irrigated and rain-fed farms. Accordingly, women have valuable knowledge about water resources, including quality and reliability, and water management techniques, such as irrigation methods, water storage, among others.

6. Women are often deprived of land ownership and access, which limits their access to water sources that are usually designated for the irrigation of the lands. This drives many female-headed households into poverty and deprives them of clean water. Across the globe, women own less than 2 percent of private land. Moreover, when women have the legal right to land, customs and traditions often become a barrier to their de-facto control over the land and natural resources⁽⁵⁰⁾.

7. Data shows that women are responsible for half of the world's food production (as opposed to cash crops) and in most developing countries, rural women produce between 60 to 80 percent of the food. Accordingly, in rural areas, food security is heavily dependent on women-led subsistence farming⁽⁵¹⁾.

8. Indigenous and local communities are a valuable source for traditional knowledge and skills on nature-based water and land

management. Women are often holders of 'water knowledge' and can provide solutions for effective water management in their settlement areas⁽⁵²⁾.

Box 05: Delving Deeper into Iraq's Water-Gender Dynamics: Suggested Research Questions

1. What are other gender constructions and norms that shape the experience of women and men in relation to water scarcity in Iraq?
2. What are the main structural and institutional barriers that reduce women's resilience capacity in the face of water-related threats?
3. How do water-related threats in their convergence with structural factors and megatrends exacerbate gender inequalities and vulnerabilities?
4. How does gender and its intersections with other variables shape the experiences of different women groups across Iraqi society? For example, how does the experience of urban women differ from rural women?
5. How can the management of water resources in Iraq become an entry point for peacebuilding, social cohesion and women empowerment?
6. What are the main coping mechanisms that make women and men better able to manage, withstand and recover from water-related threats? (the notion of resilience)

(49) Ibid 47

(50) Gender, Water and Sanitation: A Policy Brief. Issue brief. 2006. <https://www.unwater.org/publications/gender-water-sanitation-policy-brief/>.

(51) Ibid 49, p.04

(52) Ibid 49, p.08

5. Towards Inclusive and Sustainable Water Responses: recommendations

The exploratory analysis of water-gender dynamics in the Iraqi society - articulated in the previous section – reveals that 1) women and girls, particularly in rural areas, are impacted differently by water-related threats and are subjected to different forms of direct and structural violence, stresses and inequalities, including harassment, gender-based violence, school dropouts, mental and physical pressures as well as violence associated with inter-clan disputes, 2) women and men perform different roles and responsibilities to cope with water scarcity and associated threats. For instance, women are often the primary managers of water at the domestic level, and 3) women are key repositories of information, whose unique knowledge and skills provide an invaluable resource for devising innovative, inclusive and nature-based solutions. Accordingly, the disproportionate and differentiated impact of water-related threats on Iraqi women along with their unique position as positive agents and change-makers postulate the imperative for mainstreaming gender in water policymaking and programming, while transforming water-related threats into opportunities and entry points for women empowerment and gender equality. Inclusive and people-centered water policymaking and programming ensure that the needs and experiences of the full spectrum of the society are being accounted for and

that interventions are designed in a well-targeted and sustainable manner. In achieving this, women inclusivity and meaningful participation – based on a structured and well-informed gender analysis – are guarantors for the sustainable management of water resources. Against this backdrop, the following section suggests recommendations on the local, national and regional levels to advance sustainable and inclusive water responses that place gender sensitivity at its core.

5.1. Local Level

Non-governmental organizations and local community groups, including women and community leaders, should be meaningfully represented in national women bodies and in the development of water-related policymaking and programming. Local organizations are often key informants of unique and localized knowledge about water-related threats, the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the management and distribution of water, communal coping mechanisms and locally-grown solutions for dealing with water scarcity. Additionally, local organizations and community groups are often mediators between local communities and local or national authorities. They can provide access and knowledge about spaces that usually lack government presence.

5.2. National Level

The removal of deeply-embedded structural and institutional barriers is imperative for strengthening women's resilience in the face of water-related threats and enabling their full and meaningful participation

in society on the political, economic and familial levels. The analysis of gender-water dynamics in Iraq inferred that structural barriers, such as the confinement of women to traditional gender roles, the increased exposure to sexual and gender-based violence, and the association of women with the notion of honor, among others, are often primary causes for increasing women's vulnerabilities and limiting their coping capacity. Accordingly, addressing the structural and institutional barriers, including discriminatory rules and regulations as well as the informal patriarchal construction of legislation, education and awareness-raising, is a first step towards creating an enabling environment for women to be able to manage water-related threats and participate meaningfully in devising solutions. Over the past decade, the Iraqi government has been trying to pass a first-of-its-kind legislation to deal with domestic violence. However, due to strong opposition from some political parties in the Iraqi parliament, the draft of the legislation has been rejected and must now undergo a process of revision and re-drafting. Additionally, there are discriminatory laws that justify or incite violence against women under the pretext of protecting the family's honor⁽⁵³⁾. Furthermore, while Iraq's civil law grants women and men equal rights in land ownership, customary laws and traditions force women to forego their rightful share of land inheritance to their

male family members, particularly to their brothers. This is to avoid the control of the family lands by the husbands of their female family members. The refusal of women to forego their land inheritance, or their resort to the justice system to retrieve their rightful property, might be a source of violent and deadly inter-clan conflicts⁽⁵⁴⁾.

The establishment of a strong national body for women affairs is a precondition for advancing gender equality and women rights in Iraq. Although the Iraqi government has its committee for women affairs, the committee has limited authority and means for implementing wide-scale plans and strategies. In 2004, a Ministry for Women Affairs was established without a ministerial portfolio, meaning it had no authoritative status, no allocated budget and very limited staff (the Minister and 13 employees). These conditions have made the Ministry's efforts rather symbolic and have disabled any meaningful engagement or implementation of women-related programs. In 2011, under the rule of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, the Ministry of Women Affairs was dissolved and there was a total absence of any mechanism for women affairs in the Iraqi government. In 2017, a new mechanism was established in the General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers, but again with very limited power and resources. Accordingly, there is a strong need to establish a national women body with a ministerial portfolio and allocated budget or/and an independent committee of gender experts, academics

(53) Expert Interview with Dr. Bushra Al-Obaidi, Head of Law Department at Al-Mustafa University College and Member of the Women's Consultative Group representing the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Iraq. Conducted on Saturday, 8 November 2020.

(54) Ibid.

and government representatives to address the rights of women in Iraq. International organizations, namely UN agencies, can play a critical role in financing such an institution and in building the capacities of relevant experts and government officials.

National women bodies and mechanisms are integral players for advancing the rights of women, shedding light on their differentiated needs and experiences, and devising gender-sensitive natural resource management interventions.

Authoritative national women bodies and their associated women networks are strongly-positioned to generate and disseminate context-specific knowledge about the experiences and needs of women in relation to water scarcity, mainstream gender in natural resource management planning and programming, devise targeted and gender-sensitive interventions, and transform water-related threats into opportunities for women empowerment and gender equality, through creating local women committees for natural resource management, upskilling and building the capacities of local women on irrigation techniques, and providing of micro loans for the conduct of small businesses, among others.

Women's engagement in natural resource management decision-making and policy-making, as well as mainstreaming water and environmental considerations into women-related national policies and plans, are important steps for building synergy between gender and environment policy-making. Despite the growing evidence of the interconnectedness between gender and

environmental issues, national policies and plans relating to these two are often put in place in silos, with little consideration for the synergy between them. For instance, a recent study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which examined 80 Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plans (NAPs), concluded that only 17 of these included language that specifically referred to climate change⁽⁵⁵⁾. Likewise, Iraq's NAP (2014-2018) has only referred to the environment in relation to the removal of mines, without any reference to climate change, water scarcity or natural resource management⁽⁵⁶⁾. By the same token, a study of 65 countries by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) indicated that only 15 percent of those countries had a gender policy in their water-related ministries, and only 35 percent had integrated gender-specific considerations in water policies. Accordingly, Iraqi national plans for reinvigorating the agriculture sector and the reform of the irrigation system have to be informed by a gender analysis, through the inclusion of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local communities and women groups in consultation processes. The same considerations apply to the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources' new strategy for sustainable water management⁽⁵⁷⁾.

(55) Climate Change in Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans, Elizabeth Smith, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2020.

(56) Iraq National Action Plan for Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security (2014-2018-). Available at: <https://www.peacewomen.org/nap-iraq>

(57) Ibid 6

Box 06: Taking Stock of Natural Resource Management for Women Empowerment: Main Lessons Learned from the Joint Project “Promoting Gender-Responsive Approaches to Natural Resource Management for Peace” in North Kordofan, Sudan.

The aforementioned project was the first pilot project established by the global joint Program on Women, Natural Resources and Peace, which aims to promote natural-resource based interventions as a tool for women’s political and economic empowerment in peacebuilding contexts. This project was implemented jointly by the Sudan country offices of UNDP, UNEP and UN Women. The implementation of this project provides three important lessons on how natural resources can become an entry point for women’s empowerment in post-conflict settings, as follows:

1. The engagement of women in natural resource governance, such as decision making over access to land, water rationalization, irrigation techniques, resource sharing and sustainable livelihood alternatives, provides critical opportunities for strengthening women’s leadership skills in local conflict prevention and resolution, given the growing number of intra- and inter-communal tensions over scarce natural resources.

2. Sustainable natural resource management provides key opportunities for advancing women’s economic empowerment, particularly when climate adaptation and natural resource programming provide livelihood alternatives for disadvantaged women, such as microloans, small-scale agriculture projects, the establishment of greenhouses, and capacity-building for modern agriculture techniques, among others. This does not only directly benefit women, but the impact of these interventions trickles down to the whole community, strengthening its well-being.

3. Natural resource management can advance social cohesion by bringing opposing women groups into cooperative dialogues and problem-solving platforms. In Sudan, “bringing women from sedentary and pastoralist communities together in cooperative farming schemes, and including pastoralist women in dialogue and decision-making structures has resulted in building trust and collaboration that can extend into other areas”.

Source: United Nations Environment Program, UN Women and UNDP, 2019, Promoting Gender-Responsive Approaches to Natural Resource Management for Peace in North Kordofan, Sudan, postconflict. unep.ch/publications/Sudan_Gender_NRM2019.pdf.

5.3. Regional Level

Gender-inclusive water governance is a cornerstone for the sustainable and equitable sharing of transboundary water resources.

As indicated in the first section of this paper, the resolution of Iraq’s water problems is contingent upon the establishment of a legally-binding and comprehensive water management agreement that brings together

both upstream (Turkey, Iran and Syria) and downstream (Iraq) countries. Despite the growing recognition of the invaluable knowledge that they bring to the negotiations table, women remain highly underrepresented in water governance processes at the local, national and transboundary levels. Given women's differentiated roles and responsibilities in water management on the household and community levels, women are holders of context-specific and transgenerational knowledge and gatekeepers of water points and living environment, providing valuable inputs for the protection, sharing, and allocation of increasingly scarce and polluted water resources. Data from UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility (2017) elucidates that “involving women in water projects has made them more sustainable, more effective and also up to seven times more efficient”⁽⁵⁸⁾. Accordingly, creating arrangements and modalities for the inclusion of women, including NGOs, local community groups and women leaders from across the wide array of women groups in Iraq, is a prerequisite for the design and development of an inclusive, sustainable and locally-owned water-sharing agreement.

(58) Fauconnier, Isabelle, Annemiek Jenniskens, and Page Perry. «Women as Change-makers in the Governance of Shared Waters.» 2018. doi:10.2305/iucn.ch.2018.22.en.

Box 07: Women and Water Diplomacy in the Nile (WIN) Network: Towards Promoting Effective Transboundary Dialogue

The engagement of various stakeholders across various societies in transboundary decision-making mechanisms ensures the integration of a wider scope of environmental and social considerations into water management agreements, and harnesses the diverse knowledge and skills that are at the disposal of different community groups. In the Nile Basin, Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) established a network of women water professionals across the 11 countries of the Nile Basin under the ‘Women and Water Diplomacy in the Nile (WIN)’ platform to build the capacities of women on leadership and negotiation and support their engagement in decision-making and peacebuilding in the Basin. Discussions across women water leaders have identified four challenges for the meaningful participation of women in transboundary water negotiations, as follows:

1. **Deeply-rooted cultural beliefs and norms** that naturally associate or delegate decision-making and diplomacy to men, while making it more difficult for women to have a recognized and well-heard voice in decision-making, even when they are present.
2. **Discriminatory and unequal education opportunities**, partly driven by gender constructions and stereotypes, prevent women from acquiring the knowledge and skills that would help them build competency and equally compete with their male counterparts.

3. Persistent bias and discrimination in the workplace, including job insecurity, comparatively lower pay levels, sexual harassment, and discrimination against women candidates during recruitment due to potential maternity leaves, among others, make it difficult for women to assert themselves in the workplace and fulfill leadership positions.

4. Gaps in institutional and legal frameworks undermine the advancement of gender equality in transboundary water governance. This includes 1) the absence of national laws or regulations, such as gender quotas, that ensure the meaningful inclusion of women in water decision-making, 2) treating water and gender issues as separate, 3) the lack of gender-disaggregated data and gender-informed water policies.

Source: Tapping Our Potential: Women's Water Leadership in the Nile Basin. Issue brief. July 2019. https://www.siwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/WomenWaterLeadershipInTheNileBasin_Digital_20190814SecondVersion1.pdf.

Regional mechanisms, such as the League of Arab States (LAS), the Arab Water Council (AWC) and the Arab Women Organization (AWO) can provide a much-needed platform for generating and disseminating knowledge and policy recommendations on gender-sensitive transboundary water management. Despite Iran and Turkey not being members of the aforementioned regional organizations, these organizations are critical regional knowledge hubs that can provide best practices and lessons learned on gender inclusivity in water policy making and programming on the regional level, and can bridge the silos between environment and gender in regional plans and strategies.

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