



Women and Water

Consultation UNECE region

23 March 2026

Report

Executive Summary

The meeting focused on discussing the variety of issues relating to water and women and girls in advance of the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development in April. A brief introduction on the NGO Committee on the Status of Women Working Group on UNECE and their work on the UNECE Conventions was provided by Co-Chair and Vice President of NGOCSW Geneva Zarin Hainsworth. It was noted that there will be an in persons event in Geneva as part of the UNECE Regional Forum on the subject of women and water. After the introduction participants from various organisations shared their three key concerns about water, including access barriers, pollution, climate change impacts, and governance issues. Participants then divided into four discussion rooms focusing on governance, education and health, pollution and climate change, and future planning respectively. It was noted that a report from this event will be drafted and shared with members to capture the three key points plus further reflections from the breakout rooms which were set up to enable more detailed discussions.

Through the reflection after the breakout rooms, key insights emerged including the need for robust funding mechanisms, better research on water contamination including pesticides, and the importance of involving women at all levels of water governance. Participants shared examples of water access challenges ranging from ancient sewage systems in the Global North to military-controlled water supplies in Tanzania, highlighting the global disparities in water access and quality. The discussion revealed that water scarcity and contamination are becoming increasingly pressing issues even in developed countries due to climate change impacts like wildfires and extreme weather events.

The following organisations made presentations

Business and Professional Women

- Emerging contaminants,
- Biodiversity preservation
- Digital aspects of water

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Charities

- Women suffer the most when there is not enough clean water — Provide clean water where women need it most
- We teach self-reliance and train communities — helping women become leaders in water projects (Train women and communities to manage water systems)
- Work with global partners to support women's health and dignity

Graduate Women International

- Water Access as a Barrier to Girls' Education
- School Infrastructure, Dignity, and Retention
- Education as a Tool for Water Governance and Equality

Green Women, Sweden

- Water pollution: polluters should pay
- Women's representation in water-related decision-making,
- Remove subsidies for plastic production.

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International Council of Women

- Plastic pollution: example of best practice - project sponsored by Soroptimist Club Paris, which collects plastic waste in the Mediterranean Sea.

Make Mothers Matter

- The impact of unpaid care work on women, particularly in rural areas of Central Asia and Eastern Europe
- Health risks due to poor water access and quality
- Barriers to education and employment due to inadequate sanitation.

National Alliance of Women's Organisations

- Water is essential for women's capacity not just to stay alive but to do the daily work of cooking, cleaning and laundry.
- When a new or any construction makes rivers run faster or banks are made steeper, village women can no longer access shallow accessible places sometimes used for generations.
- Impact studies and outcomes for women and girls for new pathways or any change in accessibility to fresh water must be undertaken prior to development.

National Council of Women

- Water should be accepted as a public resource and should *not* be privatised;
- (Pollution of water is a major issue domestically/locally, nationally (for all countries) and internationally, including pollution of the oceans - all countries should be responsible for the oceans/ seas not only for the 12 nautical miles which surround their own coastlines: generally the 12 nautical miles limit is seen as 'ownership' by nations/countries as to fishing rights etc - however what is important is to impress upon nations/countries that that ownership involves responsibility not to pollute - and this responsibility extends into the ocean/sea that is beyond the 12 nautical mile limit;
- Convention on the Law of the Sea (COLS) and the Tribunal on the Convention on the Law of the Sea (TCLOS) - TCLOS must have an equal number of women members so that women are equally involved in decision-making of TCLOS and active steps must be taken to ensure equal membership of women on TCLOS.

Soroptimist International

It was noted that every one of the 3 points has a health dimension to it, which certainly merits mentioning within each one.

- Stop ocean degradation (which covers pollution, plastics treaty but also pollution from land, deep sea mining, overfishing etc)- SDG 14 – all have impact on W&G. Health intersection : microplastics from ocean pollution (through eating fish if nothing else).
- Empowering women in water governance everywhere, at every level - this will naturally cover more SDG 6. Health intersection of unsafe water : diarries, increase malaria and other vector borne diseases, sick babies from birth, contaminated mother milk etc
- Upcoming/growing issue : climate/water refugees. Health intersection : mental health for refugees.

United Voices for Global Impact

- Clean water access,
- Sanitation,
- Hygiene education, particularly for youth.

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Women's Advisory Council to United Nations Association UK

- Earth's salty water 97%, fresh water is 2 to 3% BUT 69 % OF THAT IS LOCKED UNDERGROUND OR frozen,
- Environmental impacts from industry and climate change and AI; pollution - heat, chemicals, bugs. Mining uses water.
- Water access and ownership disparities particularly affecting rural and poor communities,

Widows Rights International

- Difficulty for widows accessing water as heads of households
- Increased vulnerability of widows' daughters in refugee camps
- Lack of water for health and hygiene purposes.

Women's Federation for World Peace International

- Philippine Permaculture Education Program - a WFWPI program on climate action - highlights access to water for sustainable farming
- Clean potable water for communities - WFWPI received additional financial support from Soroptimists to finance the installation of water faucets for public use. That meant life, especially for children, who pass by the station to hydrate themselves to and from school.
- Permaculture Education/Scholarship - Identifying water sources as the heart of Permaculture farming designs; training, hosted by WFWPI is going on for young scholars in Cebu and Bohol, Philippines.
- Cross cutting issues include: Technical expertise, Financial capabilities, access and health

Youth with a Mission

- Women and girls often spend hours each day collecting water, limiting their access to education, work, and other opportunities.
- Lack of safe water and sanitation reduces girls' school attendance, especially during menstruation, affecting their long-term development.
- The responsibility of fetching water exposes women and girls to long and sometimes dangerous journeys, increasing risks to their safety, physical health, and overall well-being.

Shared in writing prior to the meeting

Welcome clubs international

- Time poverty and unequal water burden on women
Women and girls disproportionately bear the responsibility for water collection and household water management, particularly in underserved or crisis-affected areas. This unpaid labour limits access to education, employment, and civic participation. Investment in safe, nearby, and reliable water infrastructure is essential to reduce this inequality.
- Gendered impacts of water insecurity on health and dignity
Water scarcity and inadequate sanitation services disproportionately affect women's health and wellbeing, including menstrual hygiene management, maternal health, and caregiving responsibilities. Ensuring affordable, safe, and continuous access to clean water and sanitation is a critical gender equality and public health issue.
- Exclusion of women from water governance and decision-making
Women remain underrepresented in water governance structures at local, national, and regional levels, despite being primary users of water systems. Meaningful participation of women in planning, management, and decision-making is necessary to ensure equitable, effective, and sustainable water policies.

World Council of Churches

- Racial, psychological, and physiological effect of water scarcity on women

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- Socio-economic impact when girls and women are responsible for water collection in agrarian economies

Other regions

Afghanistan

AWCJ and Action for Justice

1. Accelerate SDG 6 Implementation (Water Access & WASH Services)

Afghanistan is facing an acute water crisis, with over 80% of the population exposed to water scarcity, drought, or degraded water systems (UNDP, UNICEF, OCHA). Only a limited proportion of households have access to safely managed drinking water, while repeated drought cycles have severely reduced groundwater levels.

Suggested Actions & Tools:

Scale up solar-powered boreholes and decentralized rural water systems in drought-affected provinces

Expand WASH emergency programming (UNICEF, WHO) targeting displaced populations and women-headed households

Deploy low-cost water purification and monitoring technologies to ensure water safety

Increase flexible humanitarian and development funding through UN pooled funds for rapid WASH response

2. Ensure Gender-Responsive Water Governance (SDG 5 & 6.b)

UN reports highlight that Afghan women are disproportionately affected, as they are primarily responsible for water collection, often walking long distances under unsafe conditions. At the same time, current restrictions on women's participation have effectively excluded them from water governance, humanitarian programming, and climate decision-making, undermining SDG commitments.

Suggested Actions & Tools:

Establish inclusive community water committees, ensuring safe and meaningful participation of women

Support women-led local networks and civil society as key partners in WASH delivery and monitoring

Integrate UN gender equality tools (Gender Markers, Gender Action Plans) across all water and climate interventions

Provide remote and community-based capacity-building mechanisms to sustain women's engagement despite restrictions

3. Strengthen Climate-Resilient Water Systems (SDG 6.5 & SDG 13)

Afghanistan is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change, with frequent droughts, floods, and declining water tables (UNEP, UNDP). The lack of integrated water resource management and infrastructure has intensified food insecurity and displacement.

Suggested Actions & Tools:

Invest in integrated water resource management (IWRM) and basin-level planning aligned with SDG 6.5

Promote nature-based solutions such as watershed restoration, rainwater harvesting, and sustainable irrigation

Develop early warning systems for drought and flood risks using climate data and digital tools

Mobilize climate finance (Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund) specifically for Afghanistan's Without urgent, gender-responsive, and climate-resilient water interventions, Afghanistan's crisis will deepen—disproportionately affecting women and girls and further undermining stability, health, and development. Addressing water is not only a humanitarian priority, but a pathway to justice, resilience, and sustainable peace.

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Participants

In addition to the organisations listed above, participants represented a number of different organisations including: Swedish Women's Lobby, European Women's Lobby, ADVANCE, Equally Ours, Rotary Finland and University of Helsinki.

Breakout rooms

Key themes that emerged during the presentations included; education; oceans, pollution, climate change, plastic, emerging contaminants; water governance and law; future proofing, carework; health; digital issues. There were four breakout rooms used to try to cover the variety of issues: Governance, Education and health, Pollution and climate change, and Future planning topics

Reflections from the breakout groups covered a number of themes with comments made that included research from various events held in 2026 including insights on climate change and clean water sanitation, highlighting the need for \$1 trillion annual investment to achieve sustainable water resources management; plastic pollution's impact on wildlife and coastal erosion in Caribbean islands.

Further comments included :

- Cost and health implications of lack of clean water access, especially affecting women and children
- The result of the use of pesticides and need for research - how they affect women
- More flooding with pollution
- More robust sanctions to improve air quality and reduce pollution and fossil fuels
- Water contamination issues, particularly focusing on ancient pipelines containing lead that are causing poisoning and contamination
- Contaminated water, and the lack of investment in modern sewage systems, both in developing and developed countries
- More action to move away from fossil fuels and improve air quality
- Safe water practices, governance issues, climate resilient water systems, and the social impact of water collection on women
- Importance of local groups, training, women's involvement at all levels, and international coordination in addressing water issues
- Increase in political will in strategy for water safe access
- Mobilisation of finances with relevant political will
- Medical needs
- Overall access - women are reported missing the socialisation time in collecting water
- Local, national and international legislation
- Local groups - become active and this is best practice
- Training about water and respect of water
- Women for water partnership - many projects about clean water - women activated
- Women have to be active at all levels
- Also in governance at international level
- Water access and pollution issues, highlighting the different experiences between Global North and Global South regions
- Research on agricultural practices affecting male fertility
- Alternative wastewater treatment methods like reed beds
- Examples of successful policy changes, such as the UK's carrier bag levy and smoking bans in airlines, which demonstrated the effectiveness of financial sanctions

Participants shared personal experiences with water scarcity and pollution, including recent issues in Denmark and the UK, leading to discussions about the need for better water conservation and awareness.

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Next steps

Compile and distribute a summary report of the meeting, including key points and insights from all participants, and ensure it is shared with all attendees for review and possible revision.

All participants to review the summary report once received and provide feedback or corrections to ensure points are represented accurately.

All participants to consider ways to better capture and share detailed examples and best practices discussed in breakout rooms for future meetings.

Establish a new Working Group - Women and Water

After thanks to those who had organised the meeting and those who had participated, the meeting was closed.

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