Special session:

Accelerating Gender Equality in the Water Domain: The Way Forward

Key messages and Conclusions
**Programme 13.30 – 15.00**

**Introduction**
- Ms. Enang Moma Efiom, National Professional Officer at UNESCO Multisectoral Regional Office Abuja – Master of Ceremony

**Welcoming words**
- Ms. Shamila Nair-Bedouelle, Assistant Director-General for Natural Sciences of UNESCO

**Call for Action Multi-Stakeholder Coalition members:**
**Messages from High Level Country Representatives**
**Member States’ support to the Initiative and Introduction to the 2023 International Water Decade Mid-Term Commemoration**
- H.E. Mr. Borut Pahor, President of Slovenia
- H.E. Mr. Laurent Tchagba, Minister of Hydraulics of Ivory Coast
- H.E. Ms. Marina Sereni, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy

**Overcoming inequalities in water: advancing access to safe drinking water and sanitation**
- Mr. Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation

**Presentation of the Call for Action Initiative – The way forward**
- On behalf of Michela Miletto, Director of UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme: Ms. Laura Imburgia, Senior Water and Gender Programme Specialist, UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme

**Messages from the Call for Action Multi-Stakeholder Coalition members:**
**moving forward**
**National and regional actions to accelerate gender equality in water**
- Ms. Lesha Witmer, Steering Committee Member, Women for Water Partnership
- Ms. Oriana Romano, Head of Unit Water Governance and Circular Economy, OECD
- Ms. Maha Al-Salehi, Coordination Team, Mediterranean Youth for Water Network
- Mr. Omogbemi Omololu Yaya, Director of Regional Centre for Integrated River Basin Management (RC-IRBM), National Water Resources Institute, Kaduna, Nigeria
- Ms. Silvia Chávez Cereceda, Director International Cooperation Office, CONAGUA, Mexico

**Closing Remarks**
- Mr. Rashid Mbaziira, Executive Secretary AMCOW
On March 22, UNESCO WWAP organized a Special Session at the 9th World Water Forum, entitled "Accelerating Gender Equality in the Water Domain: The Way Forward". The session pursued to present efforts on the ground helping to overcome persistent gender-related challenges in the water domain. The session included messages from high-level country representatives and authorities, and interventions from a panel of members of the Multi-stakeholder Coalition.

This event marked an important milestone in the roadmap of the global Call for Action Initiative (Figure 1): Accelerating gender equality in the water domain that UNESCO WWAP is leading together with a Multi-stakeholder Coalition in preparation to the UN 2023 Conference in New York for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of Implementation of the UN Decade for Action on Water and Sanitation (2018-2028).

The socio-economic consequences of the lack of safe drinking water and sanitation disproportionately affect women and girls. But not only. While large numbers of women bear the burden of securing water in their domestic, care work, and well-being tasks, they are very often not sufficiently represented in decision-making processes. This happens at all levels, from local communities to the highest representations in the public and private domains.

Unlocking progress towards gender equality in water needs solid knowledge, practical solutions, and collaborative action. UNESCO WWAP together with a Multi-stakeholder Coalition, which includes Member States’ institutions, international and regional organizations, academia and NGOs, is leading a global Call for Action for accelerating progress towards gender equality in the water domain and building just and resilient societies.
The Special Session was introduced by the Master of Ceremony, Ms. Enang Moma Efiom, National Professional Officer at the Abuja UNESCO Multisectoral Regional Office. Ms. Moma highlighted a prominent fact: one in four people lack safe drinking water in their homes, while half of the world population lacks safely managed sanitation. This reality "calls us for more integrated and broad action in planning and decision-making processes, and shows why advancing gender equality is so essential". She underlined the commitment of UNESCO WWAP and the Multi-stakeholder Coalition to move from good intentions to concrete actions.

In the following welcome message, Ms. Shamila Nair-Bedouelle, Assistant Director-General for Natural Sciences of UNESCO, alerted about the shortcomings in concrete actions to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). She recalled how women and girls bear the burden of water fetching, devoting some 200 million hours each day. Meanwhile, "the water sector remains a male dominant environment". Ms. Nair-Bedouelle emphasized the interconnected nature of SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 6 on the universal access to water and sanitation: progress towards one goal will undoubtedly help to advance the other. Therefore, she invited everyone to join forces in the Multi-stakeholder Call for Action Initiative, as well as to build bridges through intense cooperation and the promotion of sustainable progress.

The session continued with the interventions of high-level country representatives in support of the Call for Action Initiative in its pathway to the 2023 International Water Decade Mid-Term Commemoration. His Excellency Mr. Borut Pahor, President of Slovenia, pointed out the severe problem of groundwater overexploitation and the importance of investing more in science, data and innovation as part of the solution. Valuing existing talent is equally critical, with equal opportunities being a practical necessity. "Women must be equally involved as men in researching, designing, budgeting, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating policies and programs in the field of water and sustainable development".
His Excellency, Mr. Laurent Tchagba, Minister of Hydraulics of Ivory Coast, picked up on the need for concrete action by sharing some government actions, designed to address women’s hardships in Ivory Coast. Among others, he mentioned the deployment of motorized pumps working clock-round on solar energy thereby safeguarding women’s health and time; improvements to the access to water and sanitation by building latrines in schools; the scaling up of training efforts for both women and men on WASH-related topics such as open defecation, and increasing women’s access to training so “they can have access to positions of higher authority and more fully bring support to the Ivorian nation”.

Her Excellency, Ms. Marina Sereni, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy reiterated the Italian support to the Call for Action. She also stressed how one of the priorities of the Italian Development Cooperation Strategy consists of the promotion of international cooperation on water resources management and of gender equality. On the one hand, the backlash against women’s rights during the pandemic calls to fight relentlessly against gender discrimination. On the other hand, it is clear that “without the full attainment of the human right to water and sanitation, the attainment of other rights is hardly possible”.

Reflections on overcoming inequalities in water by advancing access to safe drinking water and sanitation were shared by Mr. Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. Mr. Arrojo-Agudo remarked the importance of effectively listening to women and girls’ needs—particularly of those living in vulnerable communities—and to include them in project development. Moreover – the Special Rapporteur stressed—women must be encouraged to participate at all levels in water-related decision-making as well as in administration to make women’s needs and propositions be heard. He also referred to the crucial need of promoting safe menstrual hygiene, a topic that continues to be a taboo in many societies: “Women represent 50% of the world population and we have to address the right of sanitation of that 50%, menstrual hygiene included, without excuses”. In line with this, he expressed the necessity of safe spaces for women where they can feel confident, can express and give form to their ideas, in order to facilitate their participation to decision-making processes.
The session continued with an overview of the global Call for Action Initiative, presented by Ms. Laura Imburgia, Senior Water, and Gender Programme Specialist from UNESCO WWAP. In view of the unacceptably insufficient progress towards gender equality in the water domain, this global initiative aims at promoting concrete and urgent actions aligned to a set of recommendations agreed by the Multi-stakeholder Coalition and published in a joint Position Paper. “The Call specifically aims to act upon gender-equal funding, to prioritize the collection of sex-disaggregated data, narrow the gap between policy and practice, to foster women’s participation and leadership, as well as to break gender stereotypes”. In the presentation “The Call for Action: The way forward”, Ms. Imburgia informed that the Multi-Stakeholder Coalition is currently formed by over 140 individual members from different organizations and 14 Member States (Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Italy, Ivory Coast, Mexico, Nigeria, Slovenia, Spain, Tajikistan, The Czech Republic, The Netherlands, The Republic of Korea) and is open to everyone willing to join and support this Call for Action. Expressions of interest to join the Initiative can be submitted to UNESCO WWAP at any time.

Messages from the Multi-stakeholder Coalition members

In this part of the session, a panel of experts from the Multi-stakeholder Coalition took the floor to share their knowledge and experiences from the field.

Ms. Lesha Witmer, Steering Committee Member from Women for Water Partnership, and founding member of the Call for Action Initiative, explained the importance of creating a collective voice of women that connects their expertise and makes them increasingly visible. She highlighted several lines of action. One consists of further enhancing the visibility of woman water professionals to local project managers and policy makers, thereby facilitating their inclusion in the water sector, improving their overall participation to decision-making, as well as to expedite partnerships with women’s organizations. Another consists of promoting vocational training that fosters the already acquired knowledge and competences of women, and provides them with new, useful skills to deal with water management challenges. The formalization through vocational education allows women access to official recognition of their skills and capabilities.
Next, Ms. Oriana Romano, Head of Unit Water Governance and Circular Economy from the OECD described that preliminary research shows the positive impact seen in public health, trust, and the reduction of inequalities when women undertake leadership roles. However, she explained, we are still far away from reaching gender equality as only one out of five persons employed in water utilities are women. Moreover, they earn up to 30% less than men. She ended her intervention by underlining that if women succeed, the world will succeed. OECD as an economic organization can contribute to this success by making evidence available.

Ms. Maha Al-Salehi from the coordination team of the Mediterranean Youth for Water Network explained how they connect and engage Mediterranean youth from different disciplines working on water. The various contributions of MedYWat include the generation of knowledge on water-related issues in the region; serving as a platform for exchanging best regional practices, and the creation of cross-linkages with key regional decision-makers. In her intervention, she called for the participation of youth as enablers for water solutions: “Youth should also be considered policymakers of today and not only of tomorrow” and added that stronger collaboration between youth organizations and key decision-makers around water management issues is highly needed in the Mediterranean context and beyond.

As last speaker from the panel of experts, Mr. Omogbemi Omoloju Yaya, Director of the Regional Centre for Integrated River Basin Management (RC-IRBM) from the National Water Resources Institute of Kaduna, Nigeria, took the opportunity to underline that in light of being key water users and managers “women are ready to take the center-stage in the water domain and promote sustainable development. Gender issues need to be given the weight they deserve”. This can be realized if women occupy the place they merit in technical and managerial positions. Women’s participation at all levels in the management of water schemes can be achieved through stronger advocacy and, importantly, by facilitating women’s education in water-related subjects within engineering and natural sciences careers.

The Special Session was a valuable occasion to reflect on the challenges and opportunities to improve access to water and sanitation and the management of water resources through a gendered approach. The active participation of members of the Call for Action Multi-Stakeholder Coalition demonstrated the cross-sectoral commitment to accelerating progress towards gender equality, to actively advocate for the Initiative, and to invest efforts in its realization on the ground. This was reflected in the video message prepared by CONAGUA, the institution responsible for water resources management in Mexico.
Ms. Silvia Chávez Cereceda, International Cooperation Manager at the National Water Commission, CONAGUA, shared a number of actions taken on the federal level: increasing the access of women in rural areas to drinking water and sanitation services; the promotion of women in committees that exert social control and provide water services in rural areas; the allocation of additional federal resources in water committees with a women participation grade exceeding 50%, and the training of community organizations in technical and social issues. The need for a special focus on compliance with the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation and the realization of a gender perspective in water management was stressed. “Gender equality in water is a reflection of our societies. Effective, efficient and equitable water management is only possible when women and men participate equally in its management and have the benefits of its related services”.

The session concluded with the emphatic call from Mr. Rashid Mbaziira, Executive Secretary of the African Minister’s Council on Water, to support the Call for Action. In his closing remarks, Mr. Mbaziira stressed the opportunities and promising actions taking place as demonstrated by the examples shared by the session’s speakers. He remarked that the WWAP Multi-stakeholder Call for Action objectives and recommendations align with AMCOW’s work and with the new Youth, Gender and Social Inclusion Strategy. Calling for funding and efforts that are commensurate to the urgent and critical need for gender equality in the water sector, Mr. Mbazzira closed the session by inviting new members to join forces and expand the Initiative’s Multi-stakeholder Coalition.

“I encourage you to join, support and be engaged. The Call for Action is a unique opportunity to break with business as usual. UNESCO WWAP and its partners are convinced: with our ideas, hands and goals aligned, we can get gender equality back on track within the 2030 deadline.”

Ms. Michela Miletto, Director of UNESCO WWAP