



Initiative on Empowering  
**Women in Water Diplomacy**  
in the Middle East and North  
Africa (MENA) region



## The Challenge

The role of women in water diplomacy related decision-making has been underestimated, despite the acknowledged essential role of women in peacebuilding, conflict management and sustaining security, as reaffirmed by the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (adopted on 31st October 2000) and by the eight resolutions on the issue adopted thereafter. The untapped potential of brilliant girls and women is a great loss, both for women themselves and for society as a whole. Women empowerment starts with access to safe water and gender responsive sanitation so that they are in a position to act as experts, partners, agents and leaders of change, including on water cooperation given the strong linkages among water, security and peace and the potential of water as an instrument for peace<sup>1</sup>. Further emphasis on encouraging and capacitating women to take up such positions has strong merits that are yet to be explored.

## The Response

The Global Water Partnership – Mediterranean (GWP-Med) and the Geneva Water Hub joined forces at the beginning of 2020 and initiated a collaboration on strengthening the role of Women in Water Diplomacy with emphasis on the Middle East and North Africa region.

The collaboration commenced in the form of analytical/ mapping work on the current status and challenges facing women in water diplomacy and transboundary water

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/11/19/water-diplomacy-council-adopts-conclusions/>

<http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13991-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

cooperation settings in the region and developed a Comparative Study on Empowering Women in Water Diplomacy in the MENA region. The Study was developed with financial support by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) in the framework of the Water Matchmaker Project, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Through targeted outreach and dissemination activities, the analytical work has evolved into an Initiative aiming to support and strengthen the role of women involved in water diplomacy in the MENA region.

## Focus of the analytical work

The Comparative Study has compared the challenges to the attainment of more women decision makers in water diplomacy and transboundary water cooperation settings, in five Arab countries in the MENA region, including Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Morocco.

It built upon a previous mapping exercise conducted in 2017 in three Levant countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine)<sup>2</sup> and adopted the same methodology of surveying and interviewing women in water-related institutions.

The focus of the Comparative Study has been to identify the similarities and the differences in the challenges female water experts face across the five countries, and to identify the capacity building needs in terms of the various skills of a 21st century water diplomat.

Obstacles that women face are mainly threefold: negative stereotypes, a considerable gender pay gap, and social

<sup>2</sup> The first mapping exercise has been published as an article in the *Journal of Hydrology* 569 (2019) 330-346 entitled *Empowering women in water diplomacy: A basic mapping of the challenges in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan*.

expectations that negatively influence their career choices, including the need for balancing family and professional life, fitting into existing social structures, or simply struggling with lack of self-confidence. The mapping results highlighted the need for a targeted capacity building programme, including the support and mentorship by more senior experts (both female and male).

## Methodology

A short questionnaire was developed to map the main challenges facing women that hold them back from having more major roles in water diplomacy and decision making, and was answered by a total of almost 100 professional women working in the water and water-related sector.

The questionnaire was designed to provide specific insights into four main issues:

1. Their current status in the Water Sector in their national countries;
2. The main bottlenecks/factors holding them back;
3. Their perceptions on the role of water diplomacy; and
4. Linkages between the Sustainable Development Goal 6 and Sustainable Development Goal 5 in their daily work realm.

## The process so far

The draft Comparative study was presented in detail to the network of women involved in the country surveys, during a Consultation Workshop that took place online on 28 July 2020. The Workshop discussed and validated the findings of the five countries' baselines, as well as the basic comparative sections across countries, while it also identified capacity building needs and ways to respond to them.

Importantly, the Comparative Study has provided the enabling environment for the initiation of a network of women in the five countries for experience sharing and peer-to-peer learning, initiating at the same time a community of practice of women in water diplomacy across the region.

The Comparative Study was further finetuned, benefitting from discussions and input received during targeted outreach and dissemination activities conducted in 2020, including:

- the IHE Delft online cross-regional workshop on '(En)Gendering Transboundary Water Governance: Feminist Perspectives on Water Conflict and Cooperation' (29-30 Sep 2020)
- the dedicated Session on 'Women and Water Diplomacy in the MENA' during the 3rd Cairo Water Week (21 Oct 2020), which was the first presentation of the Comparative Study's findings in the Arab Region.

Aiming to complement the Comparative Study's section on what makes a good (water) diplomat and focusing on the gender aspect, a closed working workshop with prominent diplomats and transboundary water cooperation experts was organised online on 11 Dec 2020.

Making use of the above input and reflections, the Comparative Study was reviewed and finalised and will be formally launched during a dedicated online event taking place on 15 March 2021, as a symbolic date between the celebrations of the International Women's Day (8 March) and the World Water Day (22 March). The event is co-organised by GWP-Med and the Geneva Water Hub, within the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Water Policy Framework for Actions 2030.



## What is next?

The launching of the Comparative Study is being complemented by targeted dissemination efforts, including selected publications like the MEDRC Transboundary Waters Practitioners Briefing Series, the First Analytic Annual Report of the Global Observatory on Water and Peace, the IHE book on '(En-)Gendering Transboundary Water Governance', to name a few already in progress.

The Initiative's Action Plan for 2021 and beyond includes:

- Analytical Work on:
  - o Deepening in the five countries by getting additional perceptions
  - o Expanding with additional country analyses (including Tunisia and Algeria, while the inclusion of Iraq and Syria will also be sought).
- Targeted Capacity Building, with emphasis on opportunities arising from operational synergies with partners.
- A practical Mentorship Programme, involving a series of bimonthly 60-Minutes sessions with prominent diplomats and transboundary water cooperation experts.

Through hands-on and pragmatic support, mentoring a minimum of 50 women over a 3-year period, the Initiative aims to transform the informal network of MENA women that was created as a result of the Comparative Study's work, into a dynamic and growing

Community of Practice working on Gender and Water Diplomacy in the MENA region.

The Initiative is committed to actively work for making a change in the promotion of the role of women in water diplomacy in the MENA Region.

The Initiative is led by the 6 co-authors of the Comparative Study - Eng. Charafat Afailal<sup>3</sup>, Ms. Mey Al Sayegh<sup>4</sup>, Dr. Anthi Brouma<sup>5</sup>, Eng. Natasha Carmi<sup>6</sup>, Dr. Tahani Moustafa Sileet<sup>7</sup> and Ms. Maysoon Zoubi<sup>8</sup> - with the institutional coordination and support of GWP-Med<sup>9</sup> and the Geneva Water Hub<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.gwpmed.org](http://www.gwpmed.org)

<sup>10</sup> [www.genevawaterhub.org](http://www.genevawaterhub.org)



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