The Gender and Water Alliance is a network of 115 organisations and individuals from around the world with an independent steering committee. It is an Associated Programme of the Global Water Partnership (GWP) funded by the governments of the Netherlands and United Kingdom.

Because of the pooled experience and skills contained in this network, the GWA offers a mix of information and knowledge sharing activities such as electronic conferencing, a website, advocacy leaflets and video, annual reports, capacity building and pilot programmes.

Everybody, men, women and children, must help manage and share water fairly. Conflicts over ‘troubled waters’ - sometimes too much, too little or too polluted - must be avoided. They harm people, food production, nature, the environment, and sustainable development in general.

“Women in the Visayas in the Philippines reported that their views are increasingly met with respect and their needs met with regard to time of meetings, design of water supply and design of latrines” World Water Vision, 1999

Research and practical experience from the Gender and Water Alliance (GWA) have demonstrated that effective, efficient and equitable management of the available water is only achieved when both women and men are involved in making decisions on how to best share, supply and protect water.

A gender sensitive approach shows that women and men have distinctive roles and responsibilities in water-related activities and decisions. For example, in coastal areas, women gather water and are responsible for household activities; men are responsible for fishing and trading. In urban areas, women handle washing and cooking activities while men are responsible for transporting goods and earning income. To achieve gender equality and effective water management, both women and men must be involved in decision making on water management and technology.

The links between gender, poverty and water are easiest to identify when we look at domestic water use...over water, land and markets. Poor men and women are the first to suffer when the aquatic environment is degraded.

“Sometimes women-specific support is needed to empower local women to take up leadership roles, but more often training of water experts and policy makers will be justified in order to guide them to work in a gender-sensitive manner” Ms Eveline Herfkens, Minister for Development Cooperation, The Netherlands.
Explaining mainstreaming gender to water professionals

I encourage the (male) engineers to look at the impact that each decision will have on the lives of men, women and children in the watershed community. What I say to them is that in order to understand the needs, I can present unique opportunities for reforms.

Vasudha Pangare, National Standing Committee for Watershed Development and Water Resources Management, Government of India

Gender is a key variable when we look at economic activities, income generation in particular. When we look at economic activities, income generation in particular, it is important to recognize that gender disparities and even severe marginalization of women exist in many countries, large infrastructure projects that are currently planned or being considered in many countries can present unique opportunities for reforms.

World Commission on Dams: Dams and Development, Earthscan, 2000

Essential next steps

Laws and policies relating to water should be revised: where necessary to give men and women independent rights to land, water, property and inheritance.

A male-female perspective should be included systematically in the development of all national/regional policies and programmes: Relegating women’s issues to one sector such as “women’s development” or addressing them through isolated programmes does not improve male-female cooperation.

Effective representation of women in all water management organizations, from the community to the basin level: Where influence is unbalanced, affirmative action is required that goes beyond numbers and which shows that the interests of women and men are equally respected.

Gender disaggregation of information and knowledge sharing: Progress is achieved when all human related data that are presented are routinely sub-divided for sex and social indicators such as class and other factors, so that an accurate distribution of work, power, paid opportunities, skills and influence is possible.

Old and new roles and responsibilities of men and women are mobilized to best effect for the well-being of all; the creativity, energy and knowledge of both sexes contribute to making water schemes and eco-systems work better; and the benefits and costs of water use accrue equitably to all groups.

The benefits and costs of water use and efficiency of water management systems work better when women and men share decision-making powers.

Thegender equality that is required to ensure that women are more empowered to deal with water is more likely to be achieved when there is an understanding of the different needs, the impact that each decision will have on the lives of men, women and children in the watershed community.