

Diplomacy as key to economic empowerment

Speech Mariet Verhoef-Cohen, President of Women for Water Partnership and President-Elect of Soroptimist International, 17th March at 13.15 hrs. UN HQ, conference room 2, CSW61

Distinguished guests, dear friends,

Women in water diplomacy is key to economic empowerment. Why?

The Secretary-General's report about "Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work" analyses the opportunities and challenges for women's economic empowerment. It states that even though access to decent, good-quality paid work is critical for women's economic empowerment, gender gaps remain persistent and pervasive across all regions. So, everywhere in the world and not only in developing countries. In general employment, decent work and entrepreneurship enhance women's access to resources and decision-making in the household and in the wider community and economy. Despite some positive trends over the last decades, gender inequalities and gaps still prevail in labour markets worldwide and inhibit women's economic empowerment.

This is also the case in the water sector. Across the globe there are millions of water-related jobs, there is even an expected huge shortage of professionals to achieve SDG 6: the SDG about universal access to water. But our next speaker Lianne Burney will elaborate on that some more.

In many countries women, have been responsible for fetching clean drinking water for the family, providing water to grow vegetables or using water for their business and take care of the water resources.

Today in over 70 percent of households where water has to be fetched, women and girls are still burdened with this responsibility. In rural areas, women may have to walk up to two hours to get water. In urban areas where water is from shared stand pipes, they may have to wait in line for over an hour or are stuck in their houses because electricity failed and hence it's unpredictable when water is coming. Survey data for 25 sub-Saharan countries indicate that women spend a total of **16 million** hours a day collecting water: 16 million hours which cannot be spent on other activities such as education or income generation.

Women traditionally care for and protect the water resources. In modern times their knowledge is not acknowledged and is lost. Women for Water Partnership, Soroptimist International and Business and Professional Women, have taken it upon ourselves to draw attention to the important role women play as experts, agents of change and partners in achieving equal universal access to water and sanitation. We are on a mission to secure the **combined implementation of SDG 5 and 6.**

In our experience, water has always been an economic driver and a good entry point for empowering women. Involving both women and men in integrated water resource initiatives increases effectiveness and efficiency. It might mean less corruption and less waste of water.

However, unfortunately there are many obstacles to full involvement of women in water management. What are these obstacles?

For one there is the clear divide that separates domestic use from other productive uses of water. Women use water for the household, subsistence farming and other non-income-producing uses – which in fact is an extension of their domestic roles.

Water management is largely seen as technology driven, and for generations technology has **not** been perceived as women's business! Even women themselves believe that.

The reasons why women are lagging, are no longer linked only to differences in the levels of education, For example, women are perceived as unsuitable for professional field work because it is not done that they travel with a male colleague, or due to the unsafe working environment, or due to a lack of sanitation facilities.

All in all, the role of women as water professionals and/ or traditional water managers is not valued enough. Projects managed by women are often not recognized as contributing to Integrated Water Resource Management. Infrastructure is not maintained, also because women are left behind and not being trained as i.e plumbers.

So, how can we remove these barriers? By working together with men to show concrete examples of successful women in the water sector. By getting more women involved as policy experts, diplomats, professionals.

Many members of Women for Water Partnership and local women organisations are being empowered: many members embarked on income generating projects or small scale businesses after access to water was secured. By learning how to deal with authorities, how to negotiate with suppliers, to keep the books straight and to manage projects. Also water is essential for most enterprises and without water, women have no time to start up their business. So, **access to water is key to women's economic empowerment**

What can we do to change the situation?

First of all, it requires a change in the **mind-set** to view women as experts and agents of change rather than as victims, vulnerable groups or beneficiaries only.

Women need to have access to vocational training in water-related jobs to be recognised as professionals in today's world.

Secondly, we must combine the implementation of SDG 5 and 6 in national action plans. This does not happen automatically and we have to influence the policymakers and budget holders. Many countries consider women and water issues as part of their priorities, but in practice there is little "horizontal" coordination between the two. We are often faced with different ministries, different advisors, and different mechanisms, not only at country level but also in the UN.

Moreover, it is effective to include women at all levels of decision making and setting quotas helps. Having at least 40% women in water governing bodies and **ensuring their voices are**

actually heard. We want women to stand up and be counted, but it is even more important that these women raise their voices and demand attention!

It is also effective to involve women in designing, budgeting, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programs in the field of water and sustainable development. It goes together with allocation of sufficient means for empowerment, capacity development, vocational training, career enhancement, to enable women to fulfil these roles. Finances should reach women directly, because that is the most effective and efficient way.

It is also of utmost importance to collect good data, to look at water diplomacy through the lens of both women and men, and to collect and analyse sex-disaggregated data accordingly to realistically monitor the implementation of the SDGs.

The above measures to change the situation are the main messages for our lobby efforts and we have gained success. More and more attention is being paid to the role of women in international statements. For example: Women for Water Partnership lobbied for inclusion of women as experts, leaders and agents of change in the water-sustainable development nexus in the final recommendations of the 7th World Water Forum in South Korea and the Budapest Summit. And together with other stakeholders, we are already preparing to integrate the main issues about women and water diplomacy in the programme of the 8th World Water Forum planned in Brazil from 18-22 March 2018. We are involved in the regional process in Europe, the citizen's process, governance and people cross cutting themes and devoted to pay attention to the role of women as experts and agents of change. We are very happy that the Brazilian mission to the UN in New York partners with us for the session today as a kind of kick off for the Forum and to show the deep connection between water, women and economic empowerment. If women do not have access to clean water for their families, for hygiene, to grow food, for health purposes, for starting businesses there is no time to earn an income and therefore no economic empowerment and no gender equality. So, in fact access to safe water and sanitation is a prerequisite for economic empowerment.

Thank you for your attention.