

Beyond Security: A Plan for Women's Water Security Policy and Governance in the Middle East

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Introduction

Water governance is a significant challenge in the Middle East region, not only due to the physical scarcity of water resources and the impacts of climate change, but also as a result of political choices and the weaponization of shared water resources in the context of violent conflicts. Compounding these systemic vulnerabilities is a critical governance gap: women’s exclusion from water management and decision-making systems, despite the fact that women and girls bear the disproportionate burden of water collection and care work. To address these interconnected challenges, this paper argues that without systematically integrating gender into water governance, financing, and diplomacy, efforts to address water scarcity in the Middle East will remain incomplete, inefficient, and potentially counterproductive. The paper proposes recommendations for reforming regional governance and mobilizing inclusive financing. These recommendations push national governments to frame water access as a gendered human security issue, call on Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) and climate funds to integrate gender equality into long-term water financing frameworks, and encourage the private sector to ensure water innovation and infrastructure development do not reinforce existing inequalities.

Water Stress, Scarcity, Risk, and Crisis

[According to a landmark UN report released](#) in January 2026, the world has entered an era of “global water bankruptcy.” The term describes a new [reality](#) in which many human–water systems have depleted both surface and groundwater resources to such an extent that returning to historical, sustainable baselines may no longer be possible. Women are among the [groups disproportionately burdened](#) with this new reality along with smallholder farmers, youth, indigenous communities and low-income urban residents.

While this global trend is concerning, its implications are particularly acute in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where structural water dependence, geopolitical tensions, and climate vulnerability intersect. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is [the world’s most water-stressed region](#). Of the top six most water-stressed countries in the world, [five](#) are in the Middle East: Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar. According to some projections, [100 percent](#) of the population in the Middle East will be living under extreme water stress by 2050. The region faces water-related stress, scarcity, and risks, all of which are distinct but overlapping challenges.

- [Water stress](#) concerns the lack of fresh water in terms of availability, quality, and accessibility, which can be related to infrastructure efficiency and water affordability.
- [Water risk](#) is the possibility of facing water-related challenges such as chronic shortages, flooding, or infrastructure failures.
- [Water scarcity](#) refers to the physical lack of freshwater resources, reflecting a high ratio of water consumption to water resources in a given area. [Climate change](#) is worsening water scarcity by diminishing the water held in soil and the amount of snow and ice, making water supply less predictable. Due to climate change, the Middle East region is expected to become [drier](#) and will experience extremely high temperatures, and chronic water shortages will likely become more frequent.

At the [local, national, and regional](#) levels, water insecurity can exacerbate social tensions, fuel conflict, and undermine livelihoods, particularly in rural areas. Reduced access to water for agriculture and household use can contribute to income loss, [food insecurity](#), and competition within communities, which in turn may increase the risk of conflict. Water scarcity can also serve as a threat multiplier that fuels migration, with [estimates](#) that by 2050, up to 19.3 million people could move internally in North Africa alone due to the impact of climate change on human mobility. We have seen cases where water shortage and lack of adequate sanitation on the local level led to a [public health crisis](#) in places like Taiz, Yemen with the cholera outbreak in 2017 that took the lives of more than 2000 people.

How the Iran War Exacerbates Water Insecurity

The current war with Iran creates immense challenges for water security on the national and regional levels. In the Middle East, desalination technology is crucial, without which nearly [100 million](#) people would not have regular access to drinking water. More than 400 of the region's 5000 desalination plants are in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC), with more than [90 percent](#) of desalinated water coming from 56 plants. Some of these critical plants have been [attacked](#) during the current conflict, putting vital fresh water sources under direct threat. The strong dependence in the GCC on desalination for basic drinking water supply is a significant vulnerability, especially in the context of geopolitical instability. Moreover, [Iran](#) is a major agricultural center in the Middle East that was experiencing a [water crisis](#) even before the war. Disruption of agricultural activities due to the U.S.-Israeli strikes and [attacks](#) on the country's water infrastructure will have detrimental effects on food security for millions of people with food price inflation already increasing in Iran by [40 percent](#) the past year.

One expert considered that the weaponization of water, alongside food and fertilizer shortages, in the Iran War makes it the first twenty-first century conflict that could create a [slow-motion famine machine](#). In the Middle East region, where many countries already face severe water scarcity, prolonged drought, and heavy dependence on food imports, these disruptions could further strain food systems, drive up prices, and intensify pressure on already limited water resources and agricultural production.

Water Crises are Not Inevitable

Yet water stress does not inherently produce a water crisis. Scarcity is a physical condition, while crisis is a result of how water is governed, controlled, or allocated. Excessive centralization, exclusion from decision-making, and conflict-driven disruption turns scarcity into crisis. Water crises typically do not reflect supply shortages as much as they indicate governance weaknesses. For example, from 2017 to 2018, Cape Town was very close to [Day Zero](#), when the city almost ran out of water due to a severe drought. [The slow response](#) from the national government to release emergency relief funding—despite repeated calls from local officials—was mainly due to budget mismanagement in the water and sanitation department and infighting within the provincial government. In Syria, the drought coupled with the political unrest that plagued the country by 2011 forced [1.3 to 1.5 million Syrians](#), mostly farmers to move to cities. Climate change, population growth and urbanization have contributed to a growing water crisis in [Afghanistan](#) that has been compounded by mismanagement of water resources. The government has taken measures to alleviate the crisis, however, they remain insufficient. This distinction between water scarcity as a physical condition and water crisis as a governance failure is critical because it shifts policy focus from purely technical, supply-side solutions toward political economy reform, institutional accountability, and inclusive governance.

The Weaponization of Water

Water crises aren't inevitable, and yet they've been manufactured - and even weaponized - in the Middle East. The MENA region has a history of weaponizing natural resources, especially water, by political actors to punish opponents or to achieve a certain political outcome. Weaponization of water can take several forms:

Direct weaponization tends to be intentional, visible, and short-term. Centralization of power, lack of accountability, and prolonged conflict make direct weaponization a

recurring feature in the MENA region. One example is Saddam Hussein's decision in 1991 to halt the [flow of water](#) to Iraq's southern marshes in retaliation for the Marsh Arabs' participation in an uprising following the Gulf War, leading to the displacement of 100,000 people. Another example relates to Libya's [Great Man Made River Project](#), which was introduced in the 1980s to address the country's lack of surface water. In 2019, during the Libyan Commander Khalifa Hifter's offensive in Tripoli, armed men [attacked the project](#) depriving the Libyan capital of water. In Yemen, the Houthis have weaponized water in [Taiz](#) by blocking the water flow into the Yemeni government-controlled city, and military forces affiliated with the Yemeni government have been involved in selling water supplies to residents for their own profit. In Gaza, it is reported that Israel refused to allow fuel and equipment to repair water pipes and desalination facilities, which [Doctors Without Borders](#) considered to be an attempt to deliberately deprive people of water. More recently, the war on Iran has witnessed [attacks](#) that caused indirect damage to desalination facilities in Kuwait and the UAE, while others in Iran and Bahrain have been deliberately attacked.

Though direct weaponization is devastating to water access and for the civilians who rely on it, **asymmetrical water governance** can create longer term challenges that are much harder to reverse as it becomes normalized and embedded in systems. National water strategies built on prioritizing unilateral national interests lead to zero-sum governance that disregards the consequences on downstream communities. Economic and climate pressures such as drought and a growing population with increasing demands for electricity and agricultural production weaken the political will to adopt a win-win approach. This is particularly evident in river basins in the MENA region, where there has been limited transboundary water cooperation. Prominent examples include the Nile river where there has been significant tensions in recent years over the construction of the [Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam](#) by Ethiopia and its potential impact on the downstream communities in Egypt and Sudan. Potential negative outcomes range from reduced water flow and affected agricultural production to diminished economic opportunity and social tensions. [The Tigris-Euphrates river system](#) has witnessed similar challenges with Turkey's construction of a series of dam projects, cumulatively reducing Iraq's share of water from the two rivers by [80 percent](#) since 1975. Iran has also pursued dam projects that reduce the tributary flow originating from within its borders into the river system, and Iraq has shouldered the most pronounced burdens. These examples illustrate that water is not only a resource constraint but also a strategic asset, reinforcing the need to embed water governance within broader security and peacebuilding frameworks.

The Role of Women in Water Governance and Financing

Despite the severity of water stress and its economic, social, and security implications across the Middle East, water supply is rarely framed through a [human security lens](#), which emphasizes the protection of individuals' access to essential resources, livelihoods, health, safety, and dignity, beyond traditional state-centric conceptions of security—nor as a governance or gender equality issue.

In many cases, a key governance gap is the exclusion of women from water management systems. Women and girls are significantly affected by water stress, with women being responsible for collecting water in [70 percent](#) of underserved rural households globally. Women and girls spend around [250 million](#) hours every day collecting water around the world. Girls under 15 (7 percent) are [more likely](#) than boys under 15 (4 percent) to fetch water. Despite this, women are [under-represented](#) in water management and governance. Global data from 2026 shows that fewer than one in five workers in 64 water utilities were women from 28 low and middle income countries. Fewer than half of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) positions in government were occupied by women in 79 out of 109 responding countries in [2021-2022](#).

This exclusion extends beyond formal utilities and state institutions to local governance mechanisms, including Water Users Associations, where women's participation and influence over water allocation, infrastructure planning, and resource management decisions often remain limited. As highlighted in [Women and Water in the Maghreb: How the Exclusion of Female Voices Harms Climate Efforts](#), the marginalization of women's voices in community-level water governance across the Maghreb can weaken climate adaptation efforts by overlooking gendered knowledge, needs, and resource-use patterns.

In the MENA region, women's agricultural contributions are [undercounted](#) in national statistics. This makes women's experiences statistically invisible and can lead to policy interventions lacking a gender sensitive lens. The [UN](#) has explicitly identified this as a barrier to effective water governance reform, and research from [small-island states](#) affirms that gender specific data makes water governance more resilient and effective. Without sex disaggregated data, policymakers cannot target investments or evaluate the distributional impacts of water policies, resulting in persistent inefficiencies and

inequities. This challenge is compounded by the lack of harmonized regional data systems, which are essential for tracking progress on women's water security and building a shared evidence base for effective policy advocacy.

This is a critical omission, as water stress intersects with [women's unequal labor burdens, mobility, restricted access to resources, and limited participation in water decision-making](#), all of which shape vulnerability and resilience in water-stressed systems. In the absence of intersectional analysis, water access and stress is assessed at the aggregate level, which obscures how climate and water impacts are unevenly distributed across households, livelihoods, and genders—weakening the ability of policymakers to design targeted, effective, and equality responses and investments.

This gap is particularly visible in displacement and agricultural contexts across MENA, where water interventions often prioritize infrastructure delivery without adequately accounting for differentiated social impacts.

- From a **humanitarian perspective**, women and girls bear a disproportionate burden of water collection and care work, especially [in rural, peri-urban, and refugee camp settings, where weak WASH systems increase time burdens and protection risks](#)—yet these differentiated needs are often underfunded in emergency and resilience financing.
 - In [refugee-hosting communities in Jordan and Lebanon](#), inadequate WASH access and unreliable water infrastructure have increased unpaid care burdens and protection risks for women and girls, while their participation in local water governance and planning mechanisms remains limited.
- From a **developmental perspective**, women's limited access to land, finance, irrigation technologies, and water decision-making structures constrains inclusion and [weakens the effectiveness of water and agricultural investments, pointing to the need for financing models](#) that explicitly target gender gaps in access and capacity.
 - [In Iraq and parts of rural Egypt](#), women smallholder farmers often face unequal access to irrigation systems, agricultural extension services, land ownership, and climate adaptation financing despite playing critical roles in household food security.
- From a **peacebuilding perspective**, [women's exclusion from water governance limits inclusive resource management and conflict prevention](#), particularly in [transboundary basins where shared water stress can heighten tensions](#), underscoring the importance of financing that supports gender-inclusive institutions and participatory water governance.
 - [In Yemen](#), women often bear primary responsibility for household water collection but remain underrepresented in local water governance and dispute-

resolution mechanisms, limiting inclusive approaches to resource management and peacebuilding.

Addressing these structural constraints by adjusting governance frameworks and shaping how financing is designed and allocated could contribute directly to a peace dividend by reducing sources of fragility and reinforcing institutional accountability. More inclusive and gender-responsive water governance systems can strengthen resilience, improve the effectiveness of investments, and support more equitable and sustainable development outcomes across the MENA region.

Water Scarcity and Women: Addressing the Finance Gap

Closing these gender gaps require significant, strategically designed, and mobilized financing. The scale of regional water insecurity in MENA [increasingly exceeds the capacity of public budgets and humanitarian response mechanisms alone](#), particularly as climate pressures intensify and infrastructure deficits deepen. According to several authoritative reports, the region's overall infrastructure funding gap stands at nearly \$994 billion, [with \\$110.8 billion needed specifically for water infrastructure projects](#) ranging from desalination plants and irrigation systems to wastewater treatment and distribution networks. The water financing gap in MENA is as much [institutional and political as it is financial](#), with [fragmented governance and coordination failures](#) across public authorities, regulators, and implementing agencies constraining effective capital mobilization. As a result, increasing financing volumes alone will be insufficient unless accompanied by governance reforms that strengthen coordination, enhance transparency, and build institutional capacity.

Due to the [short-term and reactive nature](#) of humanitarian financing, [rising debt burdens, and the perception of many MENA states as high-risk investment](#) environments, financing increasingly depends on a blended finance architecture of external actors to mobilize long-term and climate-resilient investment at scale. This includes [multilateral development banks and international financial institutions providing concessional finance and large-scale infrastructure investment, climate and adaptation funds](#) supporting resilience-building in water-stressed systems, and private sector and institutional investors—often through public–private partnerships—financing infrastructure such as

desalination, wastewater reuse, and irrigation efficiency.

Notably, the [World Bank's recent Water Forward initiative](#) reflects this shift by prioritizing more integrated, climate-resilient, and investment-ready water solutions across fragile and water-stressed contexts. In parallel, philanthropic actors and [humanitarian–development–peace platforms can play a critical role in filling gaps](#) in fragile and conflict-affected settings where neither states nor markets can operate effectively. Water is increasingly [recognized by private investors, multilateral banks, and development finance institutions as an emerging investment](#) with significant long-term upside potential.

Given the region's strong Islamic finance ecosystem, [Sukuk](#) —an Islamic financial certificate, similar to a bond in Western finance, that complies with Sharia law— offers a significant and often underutilized vehicle for mobilizing investment in water security and gender-responsive climate initiatives. Blended finance instruments can play an important role in de-risking early-stage investments and crowding in private capital, however, they are not sufficient in isolation and must be paired with reforms to sector governance, utility performance, and tariff and subsidy frameworks. The [International Water Management Institute](#) (IWMI)'s Solar Energy for Agricultural Resilience (SoLAR) project in Asia and Africa provides a useful cross-regional reference point for the MENA context, demonstrating how [private sector partners can commit to](#) tripling pump ownership among low-income farmers and doubling ownership among women.

Equally important, locally anchored and bottom-up financing approaches remain underutilized, particularly those that [strengthen women's access to finance, decision-making and leadership authority, and roles in water service delivery](#). Expanding these models could improve social trust, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and enhance water-resilience outcomes.

Case study 1: Integrating GBV into a nature-based water solutions program in the MENA region

[Al Murunah](#) (“flexibility” in Arabic) is a five-year UK Government–funded program implemented by the IWMI, in partnership with the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#) in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine. It aims to strengthen water security, climate adaptation, and sustainable livelihoods through nature-based solutions such as spring rehabilitation, flood mitigation, and soil salinity management, alongside improved water governance capacity and community water resource management. Early gender equality, disability and social inclusion analysis found that although women play a central role in household-level climate adaptation,

their participation in program activities is constrained by restrictive intrahousehold gender norms and gender-based violence (GBV), limiting implementation effectiveness. This aligns with evidence from the [UK Government's *What Works programme*](#), which shows that climate change can exacerbate gender insecurity, with a [1°C increase in average annual temperatures associated with a 4.5 percent rise in GBV patterns](#). In response, [Al Murunah+](#) was developed as a gender-transformative component working at the household level to shift norms, power relations, and financial decision-making. It integrates a couples curriculum adapted from the [International Rescue Committee's EA\\$E \(Economic and Social Empowerment\)](#) model, alongside asset transfers and business skills training, linking gender equality directly to livelihoods and climate resilience. The approach positions gender equality as a core enabling condition for effective water security and nature-based adaptation outcomes in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

A Religious and Cultural Framework for Water Diplomacy

Access to water is both a [universal human right](#) that is clearly protected in international law and treaties and a religious and cultural norm in the Middle East, providing a shared framework for water diplomacy. Islamic traditions conceptualize water as a shared communal trust rather than an instrument of exclusion or domination. The Quran clearly states “[we created from water every living thing](#)”, indicating that water cannot be substituted. Water is mentioned [63 times](#) in the Quran, which teaches that water is a [finite resource](#) and mankind is instructed not to be [wasteful](#) with water. Based on Quranic guidance, Islamic scholars have deduced a set of [principles](#) for water management. Chief among them is the notion that water should not be controlled to cause harm to others. Water should be accessible for all humans and animals, and individual rights should not be exercised in a way that harms the community given that water supply cannot increase infinitely. These principles frame water not as a commodity to be monopolized, but as a shared resource that carries social obligations. A cultural manifestation of this vision is the [Sabil tradition](#) in Islamic history, which refers to charitable water fountains that offer free water to communities and passersby. Sabilis were found in many cities across the Islamic world reflecting the Islamic tradition of the divine providence of water. The debate over water governance narrative is not just technical, but normative, shaping whether water is treated as a shared public trust or an instrument of political leverage.

Women's Leadership in Water Diplomacy

[Water diplomacy](#) rooted in these laws and cultural norms is a critical tool that allows for cooperative frameworks of water management to emerge. Defined as “an approach that enables a variety of stakeholders to assess ways to find solutions for joint management of shared freshwater resources,” local communities - including [women leaders](#), independent actors in civil society and academia - are key players. Their inclusion is crucial to provide information and perspectives that challenge longstanding biases of unilateral water ownership. Many [women water diplomats](#) around the world are engaged in attempts to promote cooperative and transboundary water governance mechanisms in vulnerable communities.

However, women's participation in water diplomacy is still limited, reflecting women's weak representation in high-level diplomacy and peace processes globally. For example, in 2022, [women's representation](#) as negotiators in active peace processes stood at 16 percent down from 23 percent in 2020. In 2022, there were [18 peace agreements](#) achieved globally, yet only one of them had a woman signatory. Patriarchal norms constitute a recurring [barrier to women's](#) inclusion in water management and diplomacy that constrain women's involvement in decision-making more generally, and particularly on water issues that require a mix of traditional and specialized knowledge. Encouraging women to pursue technical degrees in water management and building their leadership capacity are crucial to overcome this gap.

As over 50 percent of the population in every country and as a group disproportionately impacted by water stress, women must be included in water management and diplomacy for more sustainable, equitable, and empowering outcomes. But integrating women in water diplomacy is not just a matter of equity; rather, it is a practical strategy to reduce water risks, address governance failures, and promote this right for all people. Women bring essential local knowledge of water capacities, limitations, and community norms, allowing them to humanize water governance and balance hard security calculations around water. The [Women in Water Diplomacy Network](#) offers a strong model for innovative exchange-based water diplomacy workshops that bring decision makers and negotiators from a shared basin together. It creates an informal environment that builds trust and peer-to-peer exchange around water cooperation. Participant decision makers maintain communication after the workshops for continued communication and knowledge exchange. [The Stockholm International Water Institute \(SIWI\)](#) has also achieved strong results through experience exchange methodology in conflict-sensitive regions by improving understanding of neighbors' water realities and processes.

2026 UN Water Conference Thematic Areas and Gendered Implications in the Middle East

[The third-ever 2026 UN Water Conference](#) will take place in December 2026 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and is being Co-hosted by the UAE and the Republic of Senegal. [The conference is a key opportunity to advance the water security, peace, and gender inclusion agenda](#), including reinforcing water infrastructure as an inherent component of the human right to water and strengthening calls for the classification of attacks on water infrastructure as violations of international human rights treaties.

The Conference should be used as a platform to drive practical implementation and long-term cooperation, with a focus on measurable outcomes, stronger cross-sector partnerships, and expanded stakeholder engagement. The Conference is structured around six thematic areas. The following chart maps these thematic areas alongside their gendered implications in the Middle East, with a focus on inclusion, equity, and policy relevance.

UN 2026 Water Conference Thematic Areas	Gendered Implications & Policy Hook
<p>Water for people</p> <p><i>(Human rights to water and sanitation, equity, and vulnerable populations)</i></p>	<p>Women and girls disproportionately experience water insecurity in MENA, including increased time spent collecting and managing household water, heightened safety risks, and reduced access to education and economic opportunities.</p> <p>Expanding reliable access to safe water and sanitation can reduce time poverty, improve health outcomes, and strengthen social stability, contributing to broader resilience and human security in fragile and conflict-affected settings. A gender-responsive, rights-based approach to water service delivery is essential to reducing inequalities and reinforcing the human right to water.</p>
<p>Water for prosperity</p> <p><i>(Water security, economic development, nexus approaches, and efficiency)</i></p>	<p>Women in MENA are heavily engaged in water-dependent sectors such as agriculture and informal economies, yet they face structural barriers to accessing land, finance, productive resources, and participation in water and economic decision-making, limiting their economic agency and resilience.</p>

Given that water underpins food systems, energy production, and livelihoods in ME's water-scarce and fragile contexts, closing gender gaps in access and decision-making is critical to improving productivity, strengthening resilience, supporting peace, and enabling more inclusive economic growth.

<p>Water for planet</p> <p><i>(Climate adaptation, biodiversity, resilience, DRR)</i></p>	<p>Women in MENA are often frontline managers of household water under conditions of climate stress, yet their knowledge, roles, and coping strategies are frequently excluded from formal climate adaptation and water governance processes, limiting the effectiveness of responses.</p> <p>Given the region's extreme water stress, integrating gender into climate-water strategies is essential for strengthening long-term environmental resilience, improving adaptation outcomes, and reducing climate-related fragility and insecurity in MENA.</p>
<p>Water for cooperation</p> <p><i>(Transboundary water governance, inclusive cooperation, diplomacy)</i></p>	<p>Women in MENA are largely excluded from transboundary water governance and diplomacy, despite being affected by water insecurity and contributing as experts and stakeholders. State-controlled negotiation spaces further limit their participation and influence.</p> <p>As water becomes increasingly tied to regional stability and geopolitics, inclusive transboundary governance is critical for trust-building, coordination, and conflict prevention. Expanding women's participation strengthens both the legitimacy and effectiveness of water cooperation in MENA.</p>
<p>Water in multilateral processes</p> <p><i>(SDG 6, global agendas, integrated policy frameworks)</i></p>	<p>Despite global commitments under SDG 6 and related multilateral frameworks, women's needs, leadership, and participation in water governance are inconsistently reflected in policy implementation, resulting in limited progress on gender-equitable access and decision-making.</p> <p>Strengthening coherence across SDG 6, climate, and</p>

	development frameworks is essential to ensure women’s rights, leadership, and outcomes are systematically integrated into water governance.
<p>Investments for water</p> <p><i>(Financing, technology, innovation, capacity building)</i></p>	<p>Without a gender lens, water financing, technology, and innovation investments in MENA risk reinforcing existing inequalities by failing to address women’s barriers to access, participation, and benefit from water systems and related economic opportunities.</p> <p>Without a gender lens, water financing, technology, and innovation investments in MENA risk reinforcing existing inequalities by failing to address women’s barriers to access, participation, and benefit from water systems and related economic opportunities.</p>

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the Middle East, water insecurity is shaping the region’s humanitarian, development, and political future. However, the region’s water crisis is the consequence of governance failures, exacerbated by exclusionary decision-making, violent conflict, and inadequate sustainable investment. Climate change, regional instability, and the weaponization of water are all intensifying existing vulnerabilities, while women and girls continuously bear the disproportionate burdens through unpaid water labor, reduced economic opportunities, and exclusions from water governance and diplomacy. Without structural reforms, these pressures will continue to deepen fragility, gender inequality, and social tensions across MENA.

Water security must therefore be understood and addressed as a gendered human security issue that requires coordinated action across governance, financing, peacebuilding, and climate adaptation frameworks. Given the importance of water security to humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts across MENA, a more coordinated and inclusive response is needed to address the overlapping risks created by water scarcity, governance failures, and traditional gender inequalities.

The 2026 UN Water Conference presents an important opportunity to advance a more cooperative, gender-responsive, and prevention-oriented regional agenda that moves

beyond crisis response toward long-term resilience, equity, and sustainable peace. But, addressing these interconnected risks requires long-term stronger coordination between national governments, multilateral development banks, and the private sector to tackle both structural inequalities and systemic vulnerabilities in the water sector. Priority must be given to financing innovative approaches that build up institutional and local capacity, strengthen inclusive governance, and expand women's participation in water decision-making and service delivery at the household, local, and national levels.

The following recommendations should inform the policies and actions of policymakers and practitioners working at the intersection of water governance, climate policy, peacebuilding, and development, with a particular focus on the Middle East and North Africa. They are also intended for multilateral institutions, including the World Bank and regional development banks, and government officials in water and finance ministries, and private sector actors engaged in water financing and transboundary water cooperation. Finally, as gender and security practitioners and advocates engaged in water security, climate adaptation, and gender-responsive water governance, these recommendations can inform their approaches.

- 1. Governments must treat water access and governance as a gendered human security issue**

This requires the Ministries of Finance, Ministries of Water and Irrigation, and Departments of Water Resources ("Governments") to reform, finance, and enforce policies that address gendered water access gaps and structural inequalities across water systems, while ensuring women's meaningful participation in water governance and decision-making processes at all levels.

Governments should ensure universal, gender-responsive WASH services, particularly in fragile and underserved areas where women and girls bear the greatest burdens, while integrating women into local community water committees and water utility feedback systems to improve service design and accountability. This must be explicitly reflected in national water policies and National Adaptation Plans. Governments must also fund strategic programming to improve women's access to irrigation, water-efficient technologies, and water-linked livelihoods by addressing structural barriers such as limited asset ownership and constrained access to finance, and unequal access to public investments and financial services. At the regional level, governments must meaningfully integrate women in transboundary water cooperation and scientific policy processes to strengthen institutional trust and support water diplomacy and peacebuilding.

2. Multilateral development banks (MDBs) and climate funds must integrate gender equality, climate resilience, and peacebuilding outcomes into water financing and investments frameworks

MDBs, particularly the World Bank Group and the Islamic Development Bank as well as climate funds such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the Adaptation Fund must prioritize support for inclusive, last-mile service delivery programs in urban and rural settings through long-term (projects lasting more than five years), concessional and blended finance ([sukuk](#) bonds) frameworks with clear targets and benchmarks for women, including female-headed households, elderly women, and indigenous or ethnic minority communities. These approaches should align with emerging initiatives such as the [World Bank's recent Water Forward agenda](#).

MDBs must also design and implement investment project and development policy financing lending operations that adopt integrated water–food–energy approaches, linking water security to food systems, quality job creation, and circular water economies through wastewater reuse and loss reduction. MDBs should further support operations that integrate women's traditional and indigenous knowledge into climate adaptation planning, drought response systems, and ecosystem-based water management to strengthen locally grounded resilience. In parallel, MDBs must reinforce investment in inclusive transboundary water cooperation frameworks, including minimum standards for regional data sharing on sex-disaggregated data and joint planning mechanisms. MDBs should scale gender-responsive solutions that address household-level dynamics, expand women's access to supply chains, irrigation technologies, and water harvesting systems, while prioritizing service performance, utility sustainability, and measurable gender outcomes as core investment criteria.

3. Private sector actors must ensure water innovation, technologies, and infrastructure development do not reinforce gender inequalities

The private sector—such as engineering and infrastructure firms, water technology companies, and venture capital firms—must finance inclusive service delivery models, including public–private partnerships, decentralized systems, and performance-based contracts that improve affordability and equity. Women's perspectives must be incorporated into the design, implementation and evaluation of these initiatives. This includes investing in innovative approaches that generate co-benefits for tackling gender-based violence and improving water-resilience outcomes as well as providing small innovation grants and technical assistance to test and evaluate approaches in climate adaptation, mitigation, and resilience.

In addition, the scaling of accessible and affordable technologies for women producers, farmers, and entrepreneurs must be supported by venture capital and impact investment to enable early-stage water innovations and solutions are adapted to local constraints and usage contexts. Private actors must also deploy monitoring, efficiency, and early-warning tools that include women's traditional and indigenous knowledge, needs, and roles, ensuring that digital and technological solutions do not reinforce nor exacerbate existing inequalities.