



## Engendering the policy debate on valuing water

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### ABSTRACT

Although abstract, values shape decisions, and are increasingly recognized as a critical influence on decision-making related to water. 'Valuing water' as a concept gained traction in global policy discourse as a way to reconcile competing values on water. While some policy and academic discussions have operationalised this concept, none are addressing an in-depth gender perspective. We argue that more attention needs to be placed on its gendered dimensions because 'valuing water' is inherently gendered—women, men, and gender-diverse people often interact with, depend on, and are affected by water in different ways, shaping their different values on water. Ignoring these differences can lead to undervaluation of water, inequitable policies, and ineffective management, contributing to the reproduction of inequality. Our unique contribution is to outline not only *why* but also *how* to include a gender dimension to valuing water, through a gendered-values lens. To date, very little has been done to advance how this can be done. To this aim, we introduce two conceptual categories: gender-based values and gender-equity values, which clarify how different value orientations can inform gender-sensitive policymaking and practice. By doing so, this paper argues for centering gender in 'valuing water' and offers actionable recommendations for policymakers and implementors seeking to promote inclusive governance in line with with SDG 5 (gender) and SDG 6 (water).

### 1. Introduction

The reason for why diverse groups within and among societies value a seemingly identical substance - water - very differently, continues to puzzle practitioners and researchers alike (UN Water, 2021: 98). In the last decade, the term 'valuing water' was adopted by the UN High Level Panel on Water (HLPW) promoting the Valuing Water Principles<sup>1</sup> on the premise that values - how water is valued - shape all decisions made on

water, albeit at times unconsciously. The purpose of these principles is to highlight the need for more careful, transparent and inclusive water decision-making amid competing values and priorities (Schulz et al., 2024). Within these principles, there is an invitation to reconcile different values on water, but no clear indication of how to do so. In this perspective paper, we argue that valuing water has therefore been broadly interpreted across multiple sectors (i.e. academically on a theoretical basis, economically, culturally, environmentally, for food

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<sup>1</sup> Established in 2016 by the United Nations and World Bank Group, comprising eleven heads of state and one Special Adviser, the UN High Level Panel on Water (HLPW) was created with the aim was to lead efforts in managing water collaboratively, ensuring comprehensive and inclusive access to water and sanitation services. The panel's final outcome document "Making Every Drop Count" (2018) presents the Valuing Water Principles (VWP).

security etc.<sup>2</sup>) and none have to date addressed in-depth the gender dimension of valuing water. As a group of co-authors who come from academia, practitioner circles, and policy-making, we are very conscious that the lack of an instructive framework or guide on valuing water greatly reduces the probability of application.

Incorporating gender-related factors into water valuing is essential, as women, men, and gender-diverse people engage with, rely on, and experience water in distinct ways (Saad, 2024). Overlooking these differences risks underestimating the many ways water is valued and can result in inequitable policies and ineffective management, continuing to reproduce inequality (Saad et al., 2017; Saad, 2019; Najjingo Mangheni et al., 2021). It also ignores the recommendations of the High Level Panel for Water to prioritize women for better valuing water. In contrast, gender-sensitive valuing supports more equitable,<sup>3</sup> effective, and sustainable water governance (Saad, 2024).

A gender lens continues to be needed when assessing value systems, because of the unique, pervasive, and deeply-rooted nature of gender-based inequities when it comes to access to, and decision-making on water. While much work and research have been dedicated to unpacking gender-related inequalities and systemic barriers in water governance, meaningfully incorporating gender from policy agendas into implementation remains a challenge (Ahlers and Zwartveen, 2009; Dickin and Caretta, 2022; Matamanda et al., 2025). In fact, gender mainstreaming initiatives designed to empower women are often criticised for reinforcing fixed narratives and failing to recognise the varied experiences and ongoing processes through which inequalities are (re)produced (Sully, 2018). We argue that what is still missing to date in a “valuing water” approach is a nuanced gendered focus, because valuing water is inherently gendered. An initiative we collaborated on called the Valuing Water Initiative Gender Journey (in 2024) tried to tackle this gap.<sup>4</sup> The Gender Journey sought to explore the interactions between values, water and *gender* to better understand their impacts on one another and how they impact development decisions, particularly for implementing water projects with different stakeholders around the world. Our perspective in this paper is strongly shaped by our experience in, discussions and findings from this program.

From our collective observations, combined with the primary data collected through the Gender Journey, supplemented with a review of academic literature, we argue that all practices related to valuing water (including measurement, valuation, decision-making, and governance, see Garrick et al., 2017) need to also be viewed from a “gendered values-lens” (the term we introduce in this paper). We present a novel perspective on valuing water from a gendered-lens and further outline key recommendations for policy and decision-makers on how values can help address the gender gap towards water justice. As such, this paper is a timely contribution to shape current policy debates on valuing water (i.e. the 2026 UN Water Conference and the 2027 World Water Forum) and on gender, in light of World Water Day 2026 (and the UN WWDR 26) inviting a cross-pollination between the two separate policy

<sup>2</sup> For various stakeholder applications of the “valuing water” concept, see: UNESCO, (2021) World Water Development Report and the UNESCO/SIWI session for policy recommendations; the GWP tool on Valuing Water for project development; and Schulz, et al. (2024), “What does valuing water mean in practice?” for academic research. Financial analyses have been conducted by the World Economic Forum, Boston Consulting Group, and China Water Risk. Notably, these sources generally omit discussion on incorporating gender-related factors into their use of the ‘Valuing Water’ concept.

<sup>3</sup> While gender equality looks at the balance among what genders have access to or how they are represented, equity looks at the fairness or justice in the allocation and control of resources. For example, gender equity will advocate to eliminate structural barriers that prevent women from access to resources (looking at inequities) – and this may require addressing historical harm or having a larger or stronger (not equal) representation of women and girls in decision-making than men.

<sup>4</sup> A program of the Netherlands Enterprise and Development Agency (RVO).

dialogues.

This perspective paper deepens inquiries into operationalizing the Valuing Water Principles for gender-inclusive decision-making processes. By reflecting on and analysing the interplay between gender, values and water, we ask **how can a values lens offer ways to tackle gender inequity in water allocation and management?** We aim to open up the space for reflection on questions, concepts and findings of formative influence to the study of the role of values in helping achieve more inclusive and equitable water governance, especially in terms of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (improving the quality, availability and sustainability of water and sanitation) and SDG 5 (on gender equality and empowering all women and girls). This linkage of SDGs 5 and 6 is relevant because the workforce gender gap in the water sector is particularly striking (World Bank, 2019). Additionally, Joshi et al. (2024) argue that women’s bodies continue to carry the weight of underachieved development goals by governments and the international community. If valuing water is gendered, then assessing the gender representation of decision-makers and how they value water matters at every stage to understand how they shape outcomes in water governance.

## 2. Conceptual framework and contribution

*Values*, while abstract, are of notable importance. They are the underlying motivations that shape attitudes and behaviors, serving as standards for judgment and decision-making; they shape how people assess actions, policies, and events (Schwartz, 2012: 4). Wendt (1992), in the context of state-based decision making, argues that values not only regulate state behaviour; they *constitute it*. They shape the very meaning of actions and interests, and are contextually dependent. Thus from a constructivist lens people act toward objects on the basis of the meanings that they *assign* them; actions and values are not objective, but are embodied. In the context of water governance, values shape how individuals, communities, and institutions understand water and decide how it should be managed, allocated, and protected. Values as such are not always explicit; they are embedded in policies, institutional cultures, or everyday practices and are central to public policy (Muers, 2018). They are also central to the success or failure of water diplomacy (Sehring and Wolf, 2023). For instance, Mamasani et al. (2024) argue that relative deprivation as a feeling in Afghanistan–Iran water conflict dynamics is an affective factor that can implicitly influence trans-boundary water behaviours, politics and diplomacy.

Such affective or normative aspects can influence decision-making by guiding **what is considered important** (e.g., efficiency, equity, cultural norms, sustainability), **who is prioritized** (e.g., farmers, industries, urban users, marginalized groups), and **how trade-offs are negotiated** (e.g., economic growth vs. environmental protection) (see Groenfeldt, Schmidt, 2013; Heinrichs and Rojas, 2022). While more work has looked at values specifically in water governance (Schulz et al., 2017; Schulz and Martin-Ortega, 2018; Schulz, 2019; Schulz et al., 2024), to date this debate has lacked a clear gendered dimension for distinguishing how a gendered-valuing of water can impact water-related decisions and outcomes, and consequently impact gender equity (covered in Section 4). Some exceptions include the work of Sehring et al. (2023) who use a feminist institutional perspective to demonstrate that the dominance of men in water diplomacy is also reflected in core values, norms and practices (similarly the work of Zwartveen, 2017 on questioning masculinities in water).

It is important to note that the term *gender* in this paper is defined as the different socio-cultural, psychological and behavioural characteristics of being a man, a woman, or gender diverse.<sup>5</sup> Adopting a *gendered*

<sup>5</sup> Poteat et al. (2023): (1872) define the term gender diverse as ‘individuals whose gender identities and expressions differ from the gender attributed to the sex assigned at birth’.

*values-lens* therefore refers to looking at the different values, privileges and inequities across gender groups and how they shape processes of decision-making.

To help operationalise the concept of a 'gendered values-lens', we introduce two categories: *gender-based values* (defined as values held by different gender groups; for example, women may value water for health, while men may value water for economic activity), and *gender-equity values* (defined as values associated with ensuring fair gender representation). These two categories emerged out of discussions during the Gender Journey about the relationship between gender and values, and from a practitioners' perspective we identified these as two ways that gender and values intersect. Furthermore, our review of scholarly work further supported this observation, whereby some research emphasized how different genders value water in distinct ways (i.e. Alda-Vidal et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2013; Davidson and Stratford, 2007; Laurie, 2011; Nigussie et al., 2018, Packett et al., 2020; Sultana, 2009; Udas and Zwartveen, 2010; Wirf et al., 2008; Weeratunge et al., 2016; Zwartveen, 2017), while other research highlighted the need to ensure more equal and equitable gender representation in water-related decision-making (i.e. Adams et al., 2018; Ahlers and Zwartveen, 2009; Cleaver, 1998; Cleaver and Hamada, 2010; Cleaver, Nyatsambo, 2011; Coulter et al., 2019; Dickin and Caretta, 2022; Harris, 2009; Ifejika Speranza, Bikketi, 2017; Khandker et al., 2020; Krishna and Kulkarni, 2018; Meinen-Dick and Zwartveen, 1998; Mitra and Rao, 2019; Panda, 2007; Resurrección, Elmhirst, 2020; Singh et al., 2006; Sehring et al., 2023; Schmidt, 2023; Singh, 2008; Singh et al., 2005; Staples and Natcher, 2015; Thompson, 2015; van Wijk et al., 1996). While a comprehensive review is not the point of a perspective paper, we use it in combination with our observations and primary data collected in the Gender Journey, and argue these two categories are helpful for questioning and problematising how gendered values have been incorporated (or not) in decision-making on water. Gender equity values are essential for ensuring fair and balanced representation of women in decision-making processes, and the redistribution of power and resources. At the same time, recognizing gender-based values draws attention to the substantive differences in priorities and perspectives that women, men, and gender diverse groups bring to water (both management and decision-making at large).

We encourage further research to test these categories empirically (see Table 1).

So, why consider a gendered values-lens in water decision-making? We have so far argued that decision-makers make choices or judgments based on their personal and collective values (Wendt, 1992; Muers, 2018; Schulz et al., 2018). For the water sector, the reproduction of injustice and inequality is associated with how water is valued (i.e. economically, recreationally, spiritually etc.), shaping water access, allocation and even representation in decision-making (High Level Panel on Water HLPW, 2018). The HLPW's *Valuing Water Principles* include a

point on *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion*<sup>6</sup>, acknowledging that "norms and practices related to water often exacerbate ingrained gender and social inequalities" and that the relationship between water and gender "presents an opportunity to address these challenges, since water in many ways mirrors and even reinforces gender inequality" (High Level Panel on Water HLPW, 2018, p.21). Thus it is important to identify both the structural inequities and the diverse ways of valuing water held by different gender groups to create more equitable outcomes in the allocation of water resources and in decision-making.

Furthermore, practitioner reports demonstrate that writ large gender equality will not be achieved until the 22nd century (Equal Measures, 2024) and gender equality in the water and WASH sector is strikingly low compared to the global percentage of women in the workforce (47%). Women on average globally make up only around 18% of water utility workers, 23% of water utility engineers, and 23% of water utility managers (World Bank, 2019). These numbers underscore that despite much focused work in this area, attempts at including gender equity in water management and decision-making have not been successful. The problem is not just the lack of presence of women, but the value systems that shape norms and practices which dominate the sector (Sehring et al., 2023; Caretta et al., 2015; Hannah et al., 2021; Imburgia et al., 2020).

### 3. Methods

Our process incorporates a mixed-methods approach to advance the perspective we are putting forward on making valuing water gender-sensitive. Our aim is to frame observed gaps from practitioners' and policymaking perspectives on the lack of a gendered lens to valuing water, putting forward recommendations on *how to do this better*. The Gender Journey acted as the platform within which many discussions and observations were exchanged, including the collection of primary data through four focus groups with water practitioners, an internal survey within the RVO Water and Climate team, and interviews with water management and diplomacy practitioners as a way to gain further insight on their experience of the relationship between gender and valuing water in their work.

These practitioner insights were further complemented with the decision to use quantitative data from the only available global survey on the values among water professionals conducted by Schulz et al. (2024). This survey was created to explore differing values and prioritisations in water use, in principles of water governance and management, and in approaches to water policy (Schulz et al., (2024). The survey in design and analysis did not intend a thorough gendered dissection of valuing water, and as such results did not show significant differences by gender (Schulz et al., 2024).<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this study, as an exploratory exercise, and with permission to access the data, we further disaggregated responses by gender through a quantitative analysis. The global survey had initially been distributed online via social media platforms focusing on professional networks as well as promoted at international water related events. Data had been only selected for respondents who specified a professional interest in the water sector (n = 293). Through accessing the survey's open data, we aimed to distinguish if there are gender-based differences in reported values among water professionals. After data cleaning to remove incomplete submissions, we considered the responses that indicated genders 'male' (150 respondents) and 'female' (136 respondents). Respondents who chose 'other' (n = 3) or preferred not to disclose (n = 4) were considered to a limited extent in the full analysis strictly due to the small sample

**Table 1**

Gender value types of the gendered values-lens.

Gender value type	Example
<i>gender-based values</i> : how a person's gender may affect how they value water.	Women may prioritize water quality and its safety for household consumption, while men may focus on water availability for crops or livestock destined for market. In such contexts, men and women value water differently. To ensure fairness, decision-making must account for these gender-based differences.
<i>gender equity values</i> : how gender is valued in decision-making on water.	Projects and organizations must assess whether gender equity is embedded in their structures and procedures, ensuring that women, men, and people of other gender identities are not only included but given equitable (not just equal) power in decision-making.

<sup>6</sup> Under the principle of recognizing and embracing water's multiple values to different groups and interests in all decisions affecting water.

<sup>7</sup> Further information of the survey methodology and the geographical distribution of professional experiences of respondents are found in Schulz et al. (2024).

size, but responses were evaluated to provide summary statistics.<sup>8</sup>

In the survey, respondents were asked to scale how much they agree with 13 contrasting pairs of water policy statements; the water policy preferences were broadly contrasting but centred around a common topic area. For example, respondents were asked to rank how much they agreed with the statement ‘Flood risk management should focus on nature-based solutions’ and ‘Flood risk management should focus on civil engineering solutions’. Schulz et al. (2024) applied principal component analysis to identify clusters of policy preferences; these were categorized as (1) controlling water flows through engineering solutions; (2) managing water through market-based mechanisms; and (3) working with natural water ecosystems. In this study, we focus on six pairs of water policy statements which included a response for ‘mastering nature’ and another for ‘working with nature’ policies. The policy statements are shown in Table 2.

Responses to the two groups for mastering nature and working with nature were collated and compared for male and female respondents using a two-sampled *t*-test (analysis conducted in base R using R Studio). The extent of agreement with ‘mastering nature’ and ‘working with nature’ solution groups were summarised by gender and are shown in Fig. 1 in the findings section below. We acknowledge methodological constraints in this approach due to the small and uneven sample size, and inconsistency in the categorisations which we frame differently than Schulz et al. However, as this was the only available dataset on values in decision-making of water professionals, we acknowledge this to be merely an exploratory exercise to disaggregate gender data from a survey designed without this lens in mind, to see what insights might emerge if gender had been considered as a key point of analysing values.

Finally, secondary data was collected through a literature review to explore what was available and discussed by scholars at the intersection of keywords “values” (or “morals”), “gender” (or “intersectionality<sup>9</sup>”), “water” and “decision-making”. This was not aimed at conducting a systematic review, but rather to gain a sense of what has been investigated in scholarly work (i.e case study coverage, levels of governance, and recommendations made) and to explore different interpretations of what “values” and “valuing” means in research connected to water issues. The selection process led to fifty articles being reviewed and grouped thematically. The papers were coded as focusing on *gender-based values* or *gender-equity values* (or both). Insights from the papers helped us support our primary data results in the findings section below

**Table 2**

Contrasting pairs of water policy statements grouped into the themes of ‘working with nature’ and ‘mastering nature’.

Working with Nature	Mastering Nature
Nature-based solutions for flood risk management	Civil engineering for flood risk management
Best management practices and increasing awareness for water quality improvements	Water treatment technology for water quality improvement
Encourage water users to conserve water for universal water access	Invest in water supply infrastructure to reach universal water access
Increase efficiency of irrigation capacity to safeguard agricultural production	Increase irrigation capacity to safeguard agricultural production
Energy and water saving technologies should be supported to minimise the need for new dams	Build more dams to meet growing energy and water demand
More use of local and indigenous knowledge in decision making	More use of science-based knowledge in decision making

<sup>8</sup> The authors note that this exclusion requires attention in future research.

<sup>9</sup> The term was coined by Crenshaw in 1989 and calls into question the normalised categories of women (or men) that obscure the many interlocking identities by gender, class, caste, ethnicity, race, age, ability, sexual orientation, and more, as well as the power dynamics and political-economic dynamics that shape them.

(the list of articles is added as Annex).

#### 4. Findings: What are the persistent challenges in incorporating a gender lens for valuing water?

##### 4.1. Gender-based values do differ across gender groups but differences are often ignored or underexplored

As already outlined above, across various contexts, men and women tend to have different priorities, needs and values when it comes to water (Saad, 2024). For example, in Nepal's Chhattis Mauja irrigation system, Zwarteeven (1997) observed that men prioritized early-season water for land preparation, while women emphasized steady water flow to control weeds in rice paddies. These gendered priorities influence water management processes, including data collection, model calibration, and reporting (Packett et al., 2020). Zwarteeven (1997) highlights that water management decisions are not gender-neutral; gender creates different perspectives on the importance and use of water, which must be considered in policy and practice (i.e. in the design of the project asking who has access to water? How is it allocated? etc.).

Gender-based values also impact how water management (including transboundary water) is perceived and what types of knowledge (and profiles of those who represent this knowledge) are valued (Sehring et al., 2022). For example, water management has included predominantly a male engineering preference and as such is perceived as masculine leading to hiring more men on technical water projects, which reinforces gender biases and increases exclusion of women in the water management field (Zwarteeven, 2008, Sehring et al., 2022). The sector's explicitly technical and statistical focus obscures the deeply ingrained and oppressive power dynamics and gender norms (Joshi et al., 2024). Even in water diplomacy, the terms used to define and evaluate what it means to be a “successful” water diplomat are often linked to traits typically associated with men, and the dominance of men in transboundary water governance is often seen as the norm and goes unquestioned (Sehring et al., 2022). Masculinity in these professions is not just about the majority of men holding positions, but also about how professional standards are shaped by gendered values.

When considering gender, it is important to recognize that it is not isolated and exists within social contexts. Someone's economic status, ethnicity, age, and educational level all impact their values, and conversely how they are perceived and included (or not) in decisions and projects; this is intersectionality<sup>10</sup> (Thompson, 2016; Schmidt, 2023). Discrimination based on people's gender changes depending on these other factors to create nuanced situations and outcomes (i.e in consultation processes). In many water decision-making forums, the discussion on women and water does not distinguish between women who are the users of water resources and those who work professionally in the sector, and how their distinct values could shape the discussions differently (Joshi et al., 2024). The distinction here is that the latter are often easier to bring into decision-making as the “experts” and their values may differ from the former due to differences in lived experiences with water challenges; the former bring a unique range of values, insights and expertise (they are the experts on their challenges).

##### 4.2. Decision making and policy-making on water can differ when gender-based values are considered

Gender considerations have often reduced women's roles in relation to water to simplistic stereotypes, failing to address deeper issues like unequal water rights and biased methods of measuring water usage that disadvantage women, nor how they are included (Zwarteeven and Meinzen-Dick, 2001; Schmidt, 2023). As such, water decision-making has disproportionately impacted women. Riechers et al. (2025)

<sup>10</sup> Refer to Footnote no. 9 for definition.

demonstrate how due to power imbalances, strong relational values of stewardship and care of iTaukei women were left out of discussions. Similarly, Aboriginal women who are invited to “speak for the water” are frequently left out of broader water policy contexts (McGregor, 2008 as cited in Anderson, Clow, and Haworth-Brockman, 2013). If these relational values were taken into genuine consideration, outcomes of decision-making on water would prioritise nature's needs and sustaining water for future generations (Alston et al., 2016). However, often the spiritual-cultural dimensions of valuing water do not make it into international declarations, and decision-making defaults to prioritizing economic benefits in the name of modernity and development (Porta & Worlf, 2021).

Furthermore, despite the critical role water professionals play in water decision-making, data that reveals their gendered perspective around valuing water has been to date lacking in research. To better understand how gender can affect valuing water and respective water decisions and policy-making, we looked at a global survey of water professionals conducted by Schulz et al. (2024). This survey explores differing values and prioritisations in water use, principles of water governance and management, and approaches to water policy with nearly 300 respondents. The initial survey analysis itself had not thoroughly considered a gendered analysis.<sup>11</sup>

For the purposes of this study and with permission to access the data, we disaggregated responses by gender. These results are exploratory and not conclusive due to methodological constraints (discussed in Methods section), however they are indicative of the need for further research on gendered views of valuing water.

This exercise of disaggregating the data with a gender lens demonstrates that female water professionals might more likely object to a particular value system (i.e. mastering nature) in comparison to male water professionals. Additionally, gender diverse respondents responded with slightly lower values than male and female respondents for both policy clusters, indicating they were less in agreement with the policy pairs shown. The average score was 6.3 for gender diverse compared to 7.7 for female and 7.6 for male respondents regarding working with nature, and 5.1 for mastering nature compared to 5.6 for female and 6.1 for male respondents. It should be noted however that these results are based on a very small sample size and are not conclusive, but are important to note as they often get omitted in statistical analysis and equally merit focus. While it is difficult to conclude *why* there is such a distinction, and this single study cannot draw generalities of the entire sector in its results, it clearly demonstrates that among water professionals, different genders do hold different values related to water. These initial results present a strong case for conducting further gender disaggregated research on value-based water decision preferences.

#### 4.3. Ongoing under-representation of women in water decision-making demonstrates an oversight of gender-equity values

Women have overall been underrepresented in River Basin Organizations (RBOs), Water User Associations (WUAs) and in other positions of decision-making power in many countries (e.g. Adams et al., 2018; Best, 2019; Khandker et al., 2020). Community-based governance of water does not automatically lead to equitable participation and empowerment of women; it depends on the values (cultural or organizational) and the policies in place (Adams et al., 2018). Marginalized groups, including women and ‘lower-caste’ individuals, often refrain from participating due to their perceived lack of influence. For example,

<sup>11</sup> The test done in the analysis of this global survey did not show significant differences by gender (Schulz et al., 2024), though review papers on gender and pro-environmental behaviour/attitudes have mentioned a tendency for women and younger people to favour more ecologically oriented decisions, attitudes, and behaviours (Gifford and Nilsson, 2014; Kennedy and Kmec, 2018).

in rural Rajasthan, lower-caste women on village water committees felt they held little power (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; O'Reilly and Dhanju, 2014, as cited in Dickin and Caretta, 2022), resulting in such contexts that women are labeled the “silent sex” (Karpowitz and Mendelberg, 2014).

More importantly, efforts to address underrepresentation can be lackluster if the project team working lacks gender-equity values (the awareness or commitment to incorporating gender dimensions and addressing structural inequalities). Even when enforced by law, gender-responsive participation initiatives still often result in tokenistic involvement of women (Dickin and Caretta, 2022; Caretta et al., 2015; Hannah et al., 2021; Imburgia et al., 2020). For example, Kenyan public policy has institutionalized various measures to reduce gender inequality, a major strategy being to limit the representation of either men or women to two-thirds in any governance arrangement. Such policies are effective as a first step, but not enough without reinforcement, awareness-raising and capacity building for diverse gender groups of decision-makers or team members on projects to support in achieving this gender inclusion and equality (Berry et al., 2021).

#### 4.4. Lack of integration of gender expertise and capacity building among water decision-makers and on project teams limits bringing in a gendered lens on valuing water

In recent years it has become popular in the development space to talk about a shift from gender aware<sup>12</sup> to gender transformative<sup>13</sup> approaches. However, the lack of strong capacity building on gender topics signals a lack of organizational commitment and a divergence in professed and actual values within the organizational culture of various institutions. Results from the focus groups and interviews we conducted indicate that too often organizations do not allocate the level of time and funding required to address gender biases and to incorporate gendered values that can improve the structural inequalities inside that organization's culture. As such, gender equity work falls on the sidelines even if there is agreement that it can enhance the integration of gender-equity values across water projects.

Similarly, Gender Impact Assessments (GIAs) can shed light on access to and control over water resources (Simon, 2013) but have been found to be often constrained by insufficient data (Adams et al., 1999; Escobar et al., 2017; Ray, 2007, cited in Packett et al., 2020). The Gender Journey activities revealed a common concern among practitioners: without formal capacity building or training on gender, development projects attempting to include gender might cause little change or even unintended harm. If such capacity building does not bring along others (whether donors, communities, and/or implementing partners) who may not be as aware of the challenges related to gendered values in water decision-making, advancing a gender transformative approach will continue to encounter resistance and be underprioritized, merely stagnating at gender aware.

## 5. Policy Recommendations: Engendering Valuing Water

In line with the arguments above, we offer clear recommendations for decision-makers and researchers that can help ensure their work and its results are contributing to the SDG's focus on improving gender equality and increasing water justice. Many of these recommendations come from putting gender equity values into action, including through a higher representation of women's voices, in order to create the space to benefit from the insights stemming from a gendered values-lens. We

<sup>12</sup> A gender aware approach takes into account the different positions of women and men, but makes no changes to the underlying causes of those differences.

<sup>13</sup> A gender transformative approach actively works to change the underlying issues that cause or perpetuate gender inequality in the project area

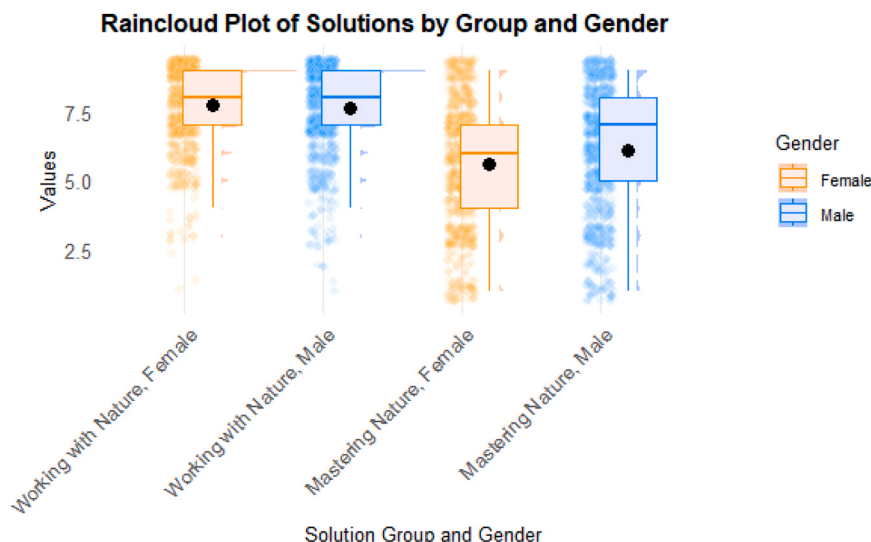


Fig. 1. Gender-based value difference when selecting preferences in water policy solutions.

suggest the following actions for better integrating a gendered lens to valuing water .

5.1. Address the elephant in the room – are you clear about your values?

Having now seen that different gender groups can value water differently (gender-based values) and that bringing in different values can provide more sustainable and holistic solutions, water practitioners and policymakers are encouraged to consider clarifying their own values around water: how does each team member value water? The next step is to identify gendered values that impact structural inequalities within both their projects and their organizational culture: how does the gender of each team member impact how they value water? In the process of identifying gendered values that impact decision-making, it is also important to identify any overlapping values stemming from other identities (e.g., education level, socio-economic status) that could unfairly silence or diminish the insights, values, and experiences of a subgroup within a single gender group (intersectionality awareness). Crafting strategies both within decision-making teams and with key actors for how to better integrate gender-sensitive values allows for diversity and insights to come to the fore and be discussed and unpacked.

Table 3  
Summary of findings and recommendations.

	Gender-based Values	Gender-equity Values
FINDINGS	1) Gender-based values do differ across gender groups but differences are often ignored or underexplored  2) Decision making and policy-making on water can differ when gender-based values are considered	3) Ongoing under-representation of women in water decision-making demonstrates an oversight of gender-equity values  4) Lack of integration of gender expertise and capacity building among water decision-makers and on project teams limits bringing in a gendered lens on valuing water
RECOMMENDATIONS	(1) Address the elephant in the room – are you clear about your values? (2) Not only a ‘gender expert’! Build teams that support gender-equity values (3) Aim for equity, not only equality! Recognize how incorporating a gendered values-lens can lead to more inclusive and sustainable water decisions (4) Call for more research on the impact of gender-based values on water decision-making	

This can open discussions on how valuing water differently through a gendered lens can lead to equitable, and perhaps novel solutions to persistent problems.

A clear recommendation is to evaluate existing policies through a “gendered values-lens”, ensuring they are not only informed by value-based research but also continuously reshaped through targeted evaluations. This approach would help bridge the gap between research and practice: policymakers would not only support research conceptually but also embed its insights into implementation and monitoring. By systematically assessing how well current policies reflect these gendered values and adjusting them accordingly, decision-makers can enhance both the effectiveness and accountability of their policy outcomes through an engendered valuing water lens. Other practical recommendations include increased capacity building on gender for water managers and integrating within this trainings on how to account for multiple values on water with a focus on women.<sup>14</sup>

5.2. Not only a ‘gender expert’! Build teams that support gender-equity values

Because many organizations have a shared culture, which is based on shared values, it is surprisingly easy to enter into groupthink and miss the insights and values that others hold (particularly those externally impacted by a policy or project). This gap cannot be filled by placing the burden of discovery and rectification on a single staff member or team member, often termed the group’s “gender expert” or focal point.

Gender inequity is a structural issue and therefore needs to be addressed at a systemic level and with clear, practical solutions (Lau et al., 2023). Actions that only address gender and values on a macro level have not been successful to date, and researchers ponder this may be because only some of the issues are being addressed while micro or middle-level issues are ignored (Guthridge et al., 2022). The full team (and partners) need to share and apply a gendered values-lens in ways that encourage discussion of different valuations related to water, especially in terms of distinguishing gender-based values from gender-equity values. Such a step often requires broader training and more importantly ongoing support for staff to learn the required new

<sup>14</sup> More details can be found in a public report that was written for practitioners and that can be further consulted: *Equity in the Flow: Exploring Gender and Values in Water Decision-Making* [VWI Gender Journey 2024 Report]. Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO). <https://english.rvo.nl/sites/default/files/2025-01/VWI%20Gender%20Journey%202024.pdf>

skills and to apply them given the range of other commitments policy and decision-makers tend to have.

### 5.3. Aim for equity, not only equality: Recognize how incorporating a gendered values-lens can lead to more inclusive and sustainable water decisions

Equality tries to treat genders on an equal basis without addressing the structural barriers and historical injustices that created the inequality in the first place. This is what equity does – it tackles addressing the structural barriers and recognising where in some contexts a little more needs to be done to even the playing field. Meaningful and sustainable solutions require holistic incorporation of differing values and gender perspectives within policy-making, project design and decision-making (Himes et al., 2025). Efforts need to be made to ensure that stakeholder consultations and decision-making are set up with intersectionality awareness and equity in mind, as described above, to involve different groups within and among various genders in such a way that differing groups can share their concerns and values around water freely and feel safe and heard. The decision-making process should incorporate their values (and concerns and priorities) in policies, practices, and solutions. For example, when women are present and able to contribute equitably, their different gender-based values become part of the discussion-creating a more holistic picture of the challenges and often providing more just solutions. Then decisions and solutions can work towards ensuring equity in water decision-making, access and use because they are based on new insights and information that come from the lived experiences of women themselves and/or those they represent. Practitioners and policymakers need to determine a fair and equitable method to include gendered approaches to valuing water in the design, data gathering, modeling, and reporting of decision-making and projects. This could be as simple as surveying users on their diverse ways of valuing water, with a gender lens in mind to analyse the results, and then to inform project decisions accordingly.

### 5.4. Call for more research on the impact of gender-based values on water decision-making

While gender-equity values are more mainstream and advocated for in policy and in research (even if their implementation is still lagging), gender-based values remain hard to identify, articulate, or work with. This is because they require “hearing out” how women and gender diverse groups value water in differing contexts differently, rather than assuming they are already represented through mainstream views. Such a line of research is highly important and still missing. Policy and decision-makers should support research to more closely examine the integration of gender-based values into water decision-making and how gender-equity values can be leveraged for enhanced impact. Researchers can collaborate with such policymakers and decision-makers to better understand the challenges they face, the consequences of not incorporating gender-based values and gender-equity values, and where such initiatives have led to better outcomes through case studies.

## 6. Conclusion

In this perspective paper we argued that achieving more just and equitable water governance requires going beyond simply acknowledging gender equality as a principle. We demonstrated that it requires reshaping the very values that inform decision-making processes, because structures of decision making and the values that shape them are inherently gendered. How we value water is inherently gendered, even if implicitly. We have also argued that engendering the discourse on “valuing water” by introducing the concept of a gendered values-lens provides a critical entry point for the recognition of women and diverse people’s values on water, and for shifting outcomes in water policy and practice in line with these values towards attaining the SDGs.

We consider this perspective paper a critical start to an informed dialogue on engendering valuing water. While we have offered recommendations for how to incorporate a gendered lens to valuing water, the challenge ahead lies in moving from rhetoric to practice. Policymakers and practitioners must recognize that gender is not an “add-on,” but a foundational dimension shaping values, which shape access to, and control over, water resources. Valuing water must be systematically addressed from a gendered lens if water governance is to become inclusive and just.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Sofia de la Rosa:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Iris Bijlsma:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Rebekah Hinton:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Nina Valin:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation. **Johanna Koehler:** Writing – review & editing. **Dona Geagea:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kathryn Pharr:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.envsci.2026.104378](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2026.104378).

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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