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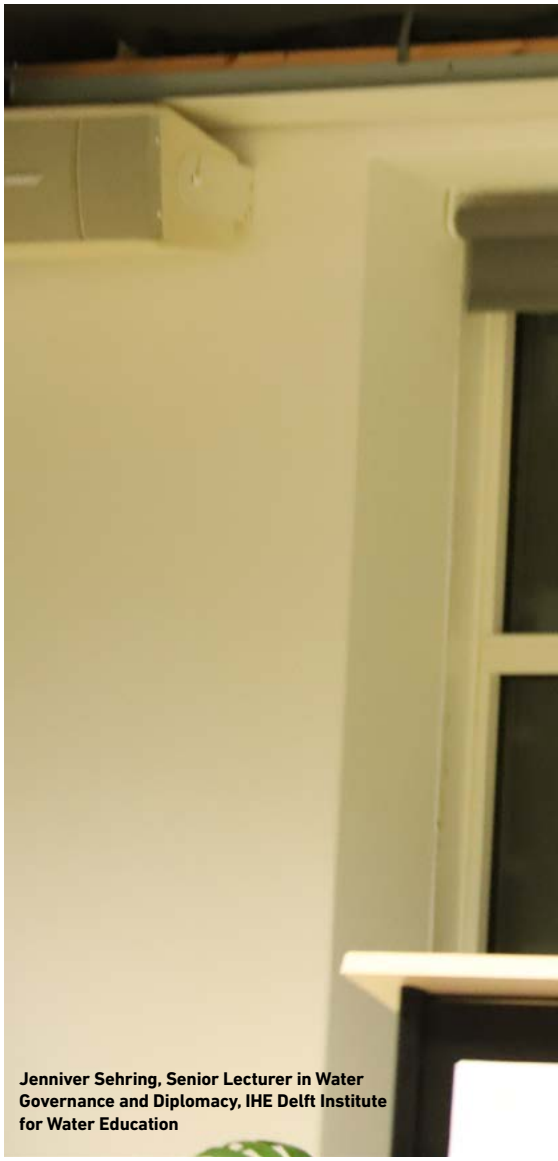
"Research with a gender perspective increases our understanding of why water cooperation in specific cases succeeds - or not"

IHE Delft, based in the Netherlands, tackles water and sanitation challenges through education, research and capacity development both on a global and national level.

Águeda García de Durango – Jacob Baraza



Jenniver Sehring, Senior Lecturer in Water Governance and Diplomacy, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education

One of the issues that IHE Delft addresses is gender dynamics in the water sector. In October, Jenniver Sehring, Senior Lecturer in Water Governance and Diplomacy at IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, along with two other female colleagues, published a book called *Gender Dynamics in Transboundary Water Governance: Feminist Perspectives on Water Conflict and Co-operation*. An essay focused on gender dynamics in transboundary water governance that questions why there are so few women that lead and work in river basin organizations and how to solve this significant gender gap.

"We brought together more than 100 researchers and practitioners from around the globe and the conference sparked the idea of a book"

First of all, can you tell us briefly about your professional career and the position you currently hold?

After studying Political Science and Social Anthropology, I started my academic career as a junior researcher in an interdisciplinary project on water conflicts in Central Asia at the University of Giessen in Germany. In this project, I was the only woman and the only political scientist among male geographers and natural scientists. This experience made me aware of the asymmetries at the intersection of gender and discipline. After several years in academia, I made a transition and worked almost 10 years as a water policy advisor/diplomat for organizations like the Council of the EU, GIZ, the German Federal Foreign Office and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Since 2018, I am at the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education in the Netherlands in the Water Governance Chair Group.

You have recently launched the book *Gender Dynamics in Transboundary Water Governance Feminist Perspectives on Water Conflict and Cooperation*. Where did the idea of writing the book come from?

My IHE colleague Margreet Zwarteveen, one of the co-editors of this book, has long been researching gender and water,

looking in particular at irrigation practices and national bureaucracies. Then, some years ago, Rozemarijn ter Horst, the other co-editor of the book, and I joined forces with colleagues of the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) for a comparative analysis of women in decision-making processes on transboundary waters in the Rhine, Nile and Chu-Talas basins. We realized that though there is quite a bit of literature available on questions of women's participation or gender aspects with respect to household water supply and local water management, academic knowledge is much scarcer when it comes to decision-making processes – be it at national or transboundary level.

This motivated us to organise an online workshop in 2020 on "(En) Gendering Transboundary Water Governance". We brought together more than 100 researchers and practitioners from around the globe. The conference sparked the idea of a book; most of the chapters are based on presentations held at the workshop.

Why is research on gender in transboundary water governance and water diplomacy important?

Water diplomacy and transboundary water governance are based at the intersection of engineering and diplomacy. These are two very different fields, but they have in common that they are highly masculinized. What do I mean with that? At the more obvious level, it means that (leadership) positions are mainly held by men, thus men are dominating the field. But it is not only a question of numbers.

By having dominated both fields for so long, men have shaped the guiding principles, core ideas and norms – for example our idea of what a good engineer or a good diplomat should do or not do. These norms have become so ingrained that we are not aware that they are based on male experience but take them as 'neutral'. However, they often pose (invisible) challenges for women – for example when "going to the field" or being posted abroad is seen as an important professional experience but is in many cultures not accepted for unmarried women or mothers with small children.

From a more analytical perspective, research with a gender perspective increases our understanding of why water cooperation in specific cases succeeds - or not. It helps us to situate joint water governance arrangements in their context. Mainstream political analyses of transboundary waters help us understand the context of political relations between the riparian states, economic and strategic interests, or power asymmetries. With a gender perspective, we add to that and learn to understand better the socio-cultural setting in which the professionals practising water diplomacy have been socialised and have learnt expectations of appropriate behaviour. This affects how they approach water-related challenges.

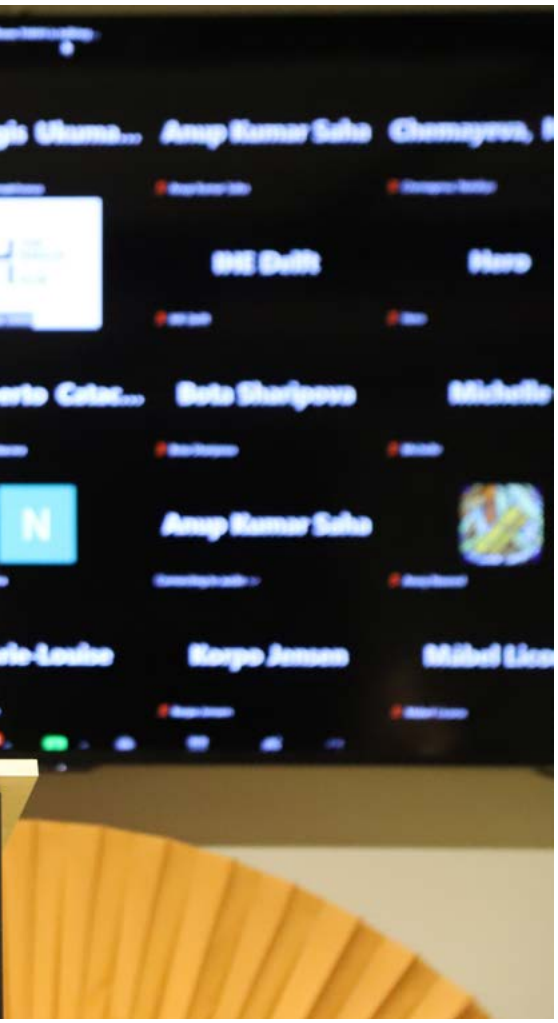
Margreet Zwarteveen, Professor of Water Governance, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education

The book has numerous contributions; how many authors have been involved in the book, and from which areas do the contributions come from?
The book contains contributions from 20 authors. Some of them are academic experts. Their chapters are based on empirical research in transboundary river basins, or are more theoretical reflections, for example on the link between gender inequalities and water conflict at multiple scales, or on what feminist water diplomacy would actually mean. Besides well-established academics, it was very important for us to include a number of promising young researchers.

"Female experts share their experiences in transboundary water policy processes or on efforts to implement gender mainstreaming policies"

But the book also includes chapters that are written by practitioners; and two chapters are in the form of interviews with practitioners. In these chapters, female experts share their experiences as women in transboundary water policy processes or in efforts to implement gender mainstreaming policies. The contributors to the book are not only practitioners and academics, they also come from different parts of the world, and thus reflect the experience from a variety of geographical, social, political and cultural backgrounds. The case studies include basins that are very diverse: the Danube, the Indus, the Jordan, the Chu-Talas, the Nile and the Zambesi.

The book focuses on gender dynamics in transboundary water governance. What are your main findings in this regard?
The individual chapters of the book look at different dimensions of gender dynamics in transboundary waters, and use different



approaches for studying them. This diversity is one of its core values. This makes it hard to summarize with a few key findings. But one main cross-cutting themes and arguments is that transboundary water governance is not gender-neutral. That might sound simple, but the chapters of the book substantiate this claim and illustrate what this means. The lack of gender equality and inclusivity bears a cost, not only for anyone who does not follow this hegemonic norm in their daily professional practice, but also in missed opportunities for better water governance.

And a second main insight of the book is that, even if this gender inequality is acknowledged and there is political will to change it, there is no easy fix. Promoting gender equality in water diplomacy cannot be reached by simply "adding women". Gender inequalities are deeply entrenched in the norms, institutional arrangements and common practices of water cooperation and the socio-political context it is embedded in. Transformational change that tackles structural obstacles and challenges traditional understandings and business-as-usual approaches to water diplomacy is needed.

> **In general women become more visible, once the water issues are not "high politics", but rather an environmental issue – soft politics**

What challenges do women face in terms of water diplomacy and transboundary water governance?
In the joint study that we undertook with SIWI, we identified the obstacles that women perceive in the Nile, Rhine and Chu-Talas basins. Some obstacles are specific to a region or country, e.g., the absence of gender equality plans in government agencies or cultural gender norms that tell women that it is not appropriate for them to strive for leadership positions in which they would excel men. But there was one factor that was perceived equally strong in all three basins: the gender division of labour. This might not be surprising as it impacts the career prospects of women across sectors. Still, it is very relevant for water diplomacy as the nature of this field traditionally requires frequent duty travels or meetings outside normal office hours, which often conflict with the care duties that still are seen mainly as women's responsibility. Having said this, we also need to keep in mind that gender is just one factor among others, and that not all women – nor men – are the same or face the same challenges.

Gender stereotyping is another stigma that influences behaviours in, for example, water negotiations. How do you think this issue could be leveraged to your advantage in such situations?
This is a very interesting point, but also one that requires us to be cautious so as not to reinforce gender stereotypes. Let me refer again to our joint study with SIWI: In the Nile, Chu–Talas, and Rhine basins, interviewees (both men and

> **"One of the challenges is that gender inequalities are ingrained in practices, private and professional socialization and cultural norms"**

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Rozemarijn ter Horst, Affiliate Researcher, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education

women) stated that the presence of women in meetings and negotiations encouraged men to behave more collaboratively and politely, making them avoid rude language and harsh tones. Thus, increased participation of women seems to lead to less confrontative negotiations, but not because women would be per se more peaceful, collaborative or similar, but because exactly this stereotype about them makes men adapt to it. That is an interesting twist, and it is actually also confirmed by studies in other policy fields.

Could you highlight any case studies or experiences in the book that have particularly caught your attention?
Allow me to refer to the case study that I myself have contributed to the book. It is about the Chu-Talas Commission, a bilateral commission for a small transboundary basin shared by the Central Asian countries Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This commission is often mentioned as a success story of water cooperation in the region, and interestingly – against the usual trend in the region – the Secretariat of the bilateral commission is headed by two women, one from each country. Thus, it would be easy to present this as an example of women in leadership positions, and maybe even to make claims that gender can explain this good collaboration. At closer sight, however, it became clear that the importance of their work is not reflected in an adequate salary or secure position. Rather, they have worked for many years on short-term project funding. In addition, the water sector in the region has lost prestige and funding and become an unattractive field. An increased number of women might not necessarily be a sign of more gender equality, but might rather reflect the societal status of certain sectors and positions.

I think that this is not only specific to this case, but that in general women become more visible, once the water issues are not "high politics" anymore, but rather an environmental issue – soft politics. It seems that the more institutionalized and less securitized transboundary water governance is, the more women are represented in leadership positions. However, to understand this interrelation better, we would need to do more comparative research.

"There are good examples of targeted programmes for female water professionals, like SIWI's Women in Water Diplomacy Network"

Finally, in what ways can these inequalities be addressed by administrations and other stakeholders?
There are good examples of targeted programmes for female water professionals, like SIWI's Women in Water Diplomacy Network, which empowers its members through mentoring, capacity developing and networking. It does a great job of connecting and empowering women working in the field of transboundary water governance. But we also have to keep in mind that increased

From left to right: Saskia Ivens, Consultant - Gender Equality, Intersectionality, Women's Rights; Rozemarijn ter Horst; Margreet Zwarteveen; Medha Bisht, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, South Asia University, India and author of one chapter in the book; Tobias von Lossow, Research Fellow, Clingendael Institute, The Netherlands and author of one chapter in the book; Jenniver Sehring.

participation of women will not automatically change gender stereotypes and the male-dominated business-as-usual. Just "adding women" will not do the job - it requires more transformative approaches. Dedicated gender equality policies have been launched in some river basins. However, their results are often rather modest, to say the least. If we really want a transformation towards more gender equality in water governance, then the more structural issues also have to be addressed. This is shown, for example, in the book chapter by Ellen Hagerman, Hellen Natu, and Christine Ochieng, who themselves were involved in an international programme to foster women's participation and leadership in transboundary water governance in the Nile basin. They showed that one of the challenges to truly transform gender relations is that gender inequalities are ingrained in daily practices, private and professional socialization, and cultural norms that we are often not aware of. Therefore, awareness raising – both with men and women - is a first step towards overcoming gender inequality. Gender policies and strategies have to be based on an assessment of the specific situation and framework conditions, and cannot be blueprints. They are likely to fail if they are only general commitment or a 'checking-the-box' exercise. Rather, concrete goals and actions need to be identified, budgets need to be allocated for achieving them, and progress has to be monitored to keep the leadership accountable. This requires both men and women to be on board: achieving gender equality should not be the burden of women alone. And in the end, not only women will benefit from it, but the society as a whole.

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