

42nd GIMAC Pre-Summit CSOs Consultative Meeting on Gender Mainstreaming in the African Union and Member States

Advancing Gender-Responsive Water and Sanitation Policies for Sustainable Development in Africa



Keynote Address

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Protocol:

Excellencies and Former UN Colleagues,
Commissioners of the African Union,
Distinguished Representatives of Member States and REC's,
Esteemed Leaders of Civil Society and Women's Movements,
Young Women Leaders and Climate Justice Advocates,
Development Partners,
Ladies and Gentle Men

Introduction

It is a profound honour to address this 42nd GIMAC Pre-Summit CSOs Consultative Meeting at a moment that calls not only for policy dialogue, but for renewed conviction on gender equity and justice. GIMAC's history reminds us that change in Africa's institutions does not begin in conference halls — it begins with organised women who refuse to accept that equality can wait. Time and again, GIMAC has proven that when African women speak with clarity, evidence, and solidarity, continental agendas shift.

From advancing the implementation of the Maputo Protocol, to shaping the Women, Peace and Security agenda, to pressing gender-responsive budgeting and accountability onto the AU policy map, GIMAC has turned advocacy into action and commitments into consequences. It has carried the experiences of grassroots women into the highest decision-making spaces, insisting that development must be measured not only by growth, but by equity and justice. GIMAC has never been a spectator to Africa's transformation — it has been an architect of it. And each victory has affirmed a simple truth: when women organise, Africa moves forward.

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Today, as we gather to advance gender-responsive water and sanitation policies and to ensure that the outcomes of the 39th Assembly of Heads of State and Government under the 2026 theme are genuinely gender-transformative we do so standing on the shoulders of hard-won gains. This is not just another summit. It is another opportunity to bend policy toward equity justice and history tells us that when GIMAC shows up with purpose, Africa listens.

The AU 2026 Theme and the Africa Water Vision 2063: A Critical Opportunity

As the continent prepares to operationalise the African Union’s 2026 Theme “Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063” and to launch the Africa Water Vision and Policy 2063, this Pre-Summit provides a veritable platform to scrutinise the policy direction and strengthen the gender responsiveness of what follows. The Africa Water Vision and Policy 2063 is intended to be a transformative implementation framework for Agenda 2063. While noting that the theme is timely and very important, I take the liberty to add that the Vision is structurally gender-neutral in wording. It speaks of assurance and sustainability, but not explicitly of gender, equity, rights, participation, or power. We all know too well that in AU policy processes, what is named tends to be prioritized and what is not named depends on advocacy streams like GIMAC to gain visibility. Gender neutrality is not always neutral in impact.

The critique is not that the theme ignores gender intentionally. It is that its formulation leaves political space for gender to be sidelined unless advocates deliberately insert it which is precisely why this Pre-Summit matters. Assurance without equity is incomplete. Sustainability without gender justice is unstable. While gender equality is generally recognised as a cross-cutting principle and appears within broader language of inclusion and participation across the AU, referencing gender is not the same as mainstreaming it. Gender mainstreaming means embedding gender across the core architecture of the Africa water vision and policy, its objectives, financing logic, governance design, monitoring systems, and accountability mechanisms. Based on anecdotal analysis, the Vision manifests three key limitations.

First, gender is treated as cross-cutting and not a structural pillar of the vision. The Vision foregrounds water security, resilience, governance, and economic transformation, but presents gender often as part of “vulnerable groups” rather than a determinant of how water systems function. This observation is important because water insecurity is deeply gendered. Everywhere in Africa, it is women who carry the heaviest burden of water collection and care. By virtue of human physiology, sanitation is inseparable from menstrual health and dignity; yet women remain underrepresented in water decision-making processes in Africa.

Second, there is limited evidence of gender-specific targets and indicators in the vision. There is no gainsaying the fact that true mainstreaming would require sex-disaggregated indicators, targets on women’s leadership in water institutions, measures of time poverty reduction, and sanitation standards addressing safety and menstrual health. Without measurable gender outcomes, implementation of the vision may default to aggregate service coverage, and as we all know too well, calculations based on averages can hide inequality.

Third, financing and governance architecture of the vision are not clearly gender-responsive. A transformative financing and governance architecture ought to embed gender-responsive budgeting in water finance, facilitate women-led enterprises, and mandate representation of women in water governance bodies. Without these levers, reforms through the vision can possibly modernise water systems, while leaving gendered power structures intact. Summarily, the gender-risk of the vision is clear. While it could expand water access and improve resilience, it has not addressed the unequal burdens, risks and power imbalances that shape water realities in Africa especially for women and girls.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen, I am not a harbinger of bad news. It might interest you to note that there are rays of light at the end of the tunnel. On a very positive note, the Vision is that great opportunity the continent has been yearning for. Since the Vision is about to be launched and thereafter enter implementation, the gaps are consequently not final. As such, GIMAC can push for gender-responsive indicators in monitoring systems; gender tagging in water finance; leadership benchmarks in governance bodies; and sanitation and menstrual health as core performance areas in the implementation of the Vision.

GIMAC can also advocate a “justice and equity spine” in the implementation of the 2026-2033 plan, thus integrating pro-poor targeting, informal settlements emphasis, rural access prioritisation, disability inclusion and gender-responsive service standards. It can design and bake in sex-disaggregated indicators, menstrual health in sanitation standards, GBV-safe access criteria, and women/youth leadership benchmarks in utilities and basin bodies. GIMAT can advocate to establish a financing architecture, not just a financing event and tie the 2026 financing conference to a bankable project pipeline and blended finance rules that protect women. GIMAT can enhance advocacy in water accountability frameworks that travel beyond the African Union Summit to the Regional Economic Communities and eventually to respective countries for implementation.

Africa’s Water Scarcity: A Human Rights Issue.

Water and sanitation in Africa are not charity and not merely infrastructure breakdown. They are fundamental human rights and cross-cutting enablers of Africa’s peace, prosperity, and resilience. In the same vein, Africa’s water scarcity is no longer a distant environmental concern; it is a daily economic, health, conflict and human rights reality. Ongoing population growth, urbanisation, climate variability, ecosystem degradation, and underinvestment have stretched fragile water systems to a breaking point in Africa. On one hand, the continent is witnessing intensifying drought cycles. On the other hand, floods are disrupting services and groundwater depletion in the continent is accelerating. The result of all this is that we now live on a continent where physical water scarcity coexists with unreliable services and unequal access.

From a human rights lens, water scarcity is not only related to hydrology; it is most importantly a distribution, governance, and power symptoms. Water may exist in a basin or aquifer and remain inaccessible to low-income households, rural communities, and informal settlements. Arguably, weak governance, limited financing, and inequitable service models determine who receives reliable services and who is left to cope with risk and uncertainty of water demand and supply. The development costs of this situation in Africa are profound because preventable waterborne disease strains health systems; poor WASH in schools undermines education; time spent securing water reduces productivity; and repeated emergencies divert public finance away from long-term resilience. Overall, water scarcity silently erodes human capital, and the demographic dividend Africa seeks to harness.

Interestingly, but sadly, water scarcity is profoundly gendered. Women and girls are the primary managers of household water. When water services fail, it is their time, safety, and health that absorb the shock. In absorbing the shock, time poverty expands and expose women and girls to physical strain, harassment, and gender-based violence. Also, sanitation deficits in a water crisis further undermine menstrual health, maternal wellbeing, dignity, and girls' school attendance. When water systems fail as they often do in Africa, women's unpaid labour expands; girls' opportunities shrink; and gender inequality deepens.

When an African child drinks contaminated water because that is his or her only choice, that is a right to health crisis. When an African girl misses school because there is no safe sanitation, that is right to education and gender equality crisis. When African women spend hours collecting water instead of earning income, that is right to development and economic empowerment crisis. When competition over scarce water fuels displacement, that is a right to peace and security issue. When floods in Africa destroy sanitation systems and droughts dry up limited boreholes, that is climate change impeding human rights.

A human rights framing of water scarcity in Africa shifts the narrative from services to obligation; from projects to human entitlements; from beneficiaries to rights-holders. The rights-based approach to water and sanitation in Africa is to amplify the narrative that Governments are duty-bearers. They are responsible for water and sanitation and must ensure that they are available, accessible, safe, acceptable, affordable and nondiscriminatory. These normative postulations have been reinforced by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. According to the Rapporteur, the furthest behind and those greatly affected by water scarcity must come first. And women and children are the furthest behind in Africa and should be prioritized in the Africa Water Vision.

In today's world that is challenged by climate change, the situation of African women in a water crisis has intensified and exacerbated. Droughts anywhere in Africa lengthens water collection times. Flooding anywhere in our continent contaminates available water sources and destroys sanitation. War and displacement anywhere and everywhere in Africa put water services under immense pressure; and competition over shrinking and limited water resources fuels local tension and insecurity. Excellencies, may I crave your indulgence to emphasize that water scarcity in Africa sits at the intersection of climate vulnerability, conflict risk, and gender inequality.

Water Governance and Women's Underrepresentation

Beyond being a gender issue, Africa's water scarcity is also a governance crisis because it is fundamentally influenced by who holds decision-making power; whose needs shape policy priorities and whose knowledge in the water ecosystem is recognized. Despite being primary water managers and first responders when services fail, women and young people remain underrepresented in water authorities, basin organisations, utilities, financing institutions, and transboundary negotiations.

Africa water governance contradicts the Maputo Protocol, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, the AU Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, all of which affirm women's participation in decision-making and equitable benefit from natural resource governance. Intentional or unintended exclusion of African women in water governance reflects inherent structural barriers, including unequal access to technical education, limited entry into formal institutions, debilitating impact of unpaid care burdens, and norms that undervalue women's expertise. The cost of this exclusion in Africa is manifest. Governance systems that marginalise those most affected are less responsive, less transparent, less sustainable and leaves women behind. Instead, such governance systems exacerbate inequality. Excellencies, resilience to water scarcity and climate shocks depends not only on engineering solutions, but on governance reforms that integrates lived experience and intergenerational knowledge of women.

Gender-responsive and rights centric water governance must therefore move beyond male dominated ecosystem toward shared authority and gender sensitivity. It must include women and youth in leadership across ministries, regulators, basin bodies, utilities, and community systems. It should also be restorative because water insecurity is equally a cumulative outcome of historical and structural injustices. One that recognises harm, addresses inequity, and repairs unequal access to resources, time, and opportunity.

Restorative water governance prioritises those historically left behind. It invests where exclusion has been deepest, thus focusing on informal settlements, rural areas, conflict-affected and climate-vulnerable regions.

Restorative water governance must design systems that reduce women's time poverty, integrate menstrual health and safety, and ensure disability inclusion. It must also repair institutions, incorporate communities as co-designers, and install women and youth to take decision-making roles. With the emergency of climate change and its corrosive vestiges, restorative water justice is urgent, because without deliberate corrective measures, resilience investments may protect already advantaged regions while leaving vulnerable populations further exposed.

What Must Change in 2026

As we move toward 2026, four shifts are non-negotiable. Firstly: Water ecosystems in Africa must move from infrastructure to justice and investments must close inequality gaps, not widen them. Secondly, it must move from access to adequacy so that dignity, safety, reliability, affordability, menstrual health, and climate resilience will define WASH. Thirdly, water ecosystem must shift from being gender-blind to being gender-transformative so that policies must redistribute power, voice, and resources. Fourthly, it must move from commitments to accountability so that measurable outcomes for women and girls are embedded in monitoring, reporting, and oversight roles. As a fifth imperative for 2026, intergenerational leadership must change to introduce young women as leaders of climate resilience, community innovation, and WASH entrepreneurship. Intergenerational leadership must be strategic necessity. It must invest in leadership pipelines, youth-led enterprises, and civic space for youth climate and water activism. A water-secure Africa must be young, feminist, and bold.

Conclusion

As we look toward 2026, the question is not whether change is needed, but what must change. Water policies must shift from reactive crisis response to risk-informed planning. Water financing must move from gender-neutral allocations to gender-transformative investment. Water governance must evolve from consultation to shared authority. And water accountability must ensure that reforms translate into lived improvements for women and girls.

The GIMAC 42nd Pre-Summit is therefore more than a forum for dialogue. It is a platform for shaping an outcome document that translates these principles into actionable commitments bridging gender justice, climate resilience, financial accountability, and inclusive governance in line with the Africa Water Vision 2063 and AU gender equality obligations.

Colleagues, water is dignity. Water is power. A water-secure Africa that excludes women is a contradiction. A development agenda that ignores sanitation is incomplete. A future that sidelines youth is unsustainable. The future of Africa's water must be feminist, inclusive, and transformative.

And as we conclude, it is my honour and pleasure to wish GIMAC continued strength, and unity of purpose as it carries forward its vital work. May this network remain a fearless voice for women and girls across the continent, a trusted partner to African institutions, and a catalyst for turning policy promises into lived realities. May the solidarity built here translate into sustained advocacy, stronger accountability, and tangible progress in rural and urban communities in Africa where water insecurity still defines daily life.

God Bless GIMAC! God Bless Africa!!

Organizers



Partners

