



**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGIC ACTION PROGRAMME (SAP) OF THE  
DINARIC KARST AQUIFER SYSTEM: IMPROVING GROUNDWATER  
GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF RELATED ECOSYSTEMS**

**OUTPUT 6.2.**

**NATIONAL WATER SECTOR GENDER ANALYSIS  
CROATIA**

DECEMBER 2025



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## Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive desk review of the current state of gender equality in Croatia, with a specific focus on water governance. The analysis examines the extent to which Croatia's strong constitutional and legislative commitments to gender equality, anchored in the **Croatian Constitution (2000, Article 3)** and the **Gender Equality Act** (Official Gazette 82/08, 69/17) are translated into substantive outcomes within the water sector, particularly in relation to Hrvatske vode (Croatian Waters). The report is based on a review of official national, EU, and UN sources, complemented by a structured interview with a managerial representative of Croatian Waters. The study applies the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) framework through the lens of "Water as an Asset, Service, and Space."

The analysis reveals a persistent gap between formal compliance and substantive implementation. While gender mainstreaming is legally mandated across public institutions, including the water sector, the absence of enforceable accountability mechanisms and the lack of legally mandated gender-responsive budgeting significantly constrain its practical impact.

The major findings of this analysis are:

- **Failure to Convert Human Capital into Economic Power:** Women in Croatia account for **59.9% of university graduates** and over half of PhD holders (EIGE, 2023), yet the female employment rate stood at **65.0% in 2023**, ranking **fifth lowest in the EU** (Eurostat, 2023). These structural labour market inequalities contribute to a persistent gender wage gap of **11.1%** (Eurostat, 2021) and a gender pension gap of 24.8% (Eurostat, 2022), increasing economic insecurity, particularly among older women. These dynamics shape women's limited access to economic opportunities within the water sector.
- **Formal Integration of Gender Equality in Water Governance with Persistent Leadership Gaps:** Hrvatske vode (Croatian Waters), established under the Water Act (Official Gazette 66/19, 84/21, 47/23), apply the Gender Equality Act and have adopted a Gender Equality Action Plan for 2023–2026 (Hrvatske vode, 2023). Women represent **46.8% of total staff** and are well represented among highly educated employees and middle-management positions. However, they remain significantly **underrepresented in senior executive and operational leadership roles**, particularly in technical and field-based units.
- **Chronic Time Poverty and Gendered Care Burden:** Croatia records the **largest gender gap in the EU** in time spent on unpaid care and domestic work, reflected in a low EIGE "Time" domain score of **48.6 out of 100** (EIGE, 2023). Managerial and mental labour associated with household water use and care responsibilities disproportionately falls on women, restricting their participation in full-time employment, field assignments, and leadership roles within the water sector.
- **Insufficient Sex-Disaggregated Operational Data:** While Croatian Waters collects sex-disaggregated data on staffing and management positions, sex-disaggregated data collection does not systematically extend to operational activities such as field

assignments, project participation, training, emergency response, or working groups. This data gap limits evidence-based water governance and weakens monitoring and evaluation of gender equality measures.

The strategic recommendations for future interventions focus on bridging this implementation gap to achieve substantive equality between formal commitments and substantive outcomes. This requires mandating **gender-responsive budgeting** across government sectors, including water governance, to ensure that gender equality measures are supported by dedicated financial resources. Systematic collection of sex-disaggregated operational data should be institutionalised to enable evidence-based policymaking and monitoring. Targeted measures should support women's progression into technical and senior leadership roles. Women demonstrated **higher environmental awareness** (Mandarić & Hunjet, 2024) and it should be leveraged to strengthen water conservation and climate change adaptation strategies. All interventions should adopt an intersectional approach to ensure equitable access to resources and employment opportunities, particularly for marginalised groups and war-affected populations (UN Women, 2020).

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Context and Background of Gender Equality in Croatia

The Republic of Croatia has established a commendable normative and legal foundation for gender equality, demonstrating compliance with international and European Union (EU) standards. This commitment is formally codified in the **Croatian Constitution**, where a constitutional amendment in **2000 (Article 3)** enshrined gender equality as a fundamental principle (EIGE, 2000). This is further reinforced by Article 14, which explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sex and various other characteristics (EIGE, 2000). Following its accession to the EU, Croatia diligently transposed the EU gender equality *acquis* into its national law, with the **Gender Equality Act (Official Gazette 82/08, 69/17)**, adopted in 2008, and amended in 2017 is serving as the primary legal framework. This Act is the cornerstone of national policy, establishing gender mainstreaming as a mandatory obligation across all public bodies (Equinet Europe, 2008).

However, while the Gender Equality Act provides a clear roadmap, the legislative provisions critically lack the necessary mechanisms for accountability. The legal obligation for public bodies to implement gender mainstreaming does not include attendant stipulations for **sanctions** for non-compliance (US Department of State, 2023). Furthermore, **gender budgeting**, an indispensable tool for ensuring equitable resource allocation and funding gender-responsive policies, is notably **not a legally or policy-mandated practice** in Croatia (US Department of State, 2023). This absence of institutional "teeth" and financial tools results in gender equality being treated as an **unfunded mandate**, which fundamentally limits the potential for substantive, resourced implementation across government sectors.

### 1.2. Purpose and Scope

This report provides a comprehensive gender analysis of water sector management in Croatia, serving as a core component (**Output 6.2**) of the **DICTAS II project**. Building upon Croatia's commitment to non-discrimination, this report aims to provide an in-depth desk review of the current state of gender equality with a specific focus on its application within the critical sector of water governance, together with an in-depth interview of representative of Croatian Waters. The analysis critically synthesizes publicly available official documents and data from major sources, including Croatian government bodies, EU institutions, and UN entities, to identify systemic gaps and establish a nuanced understanding of implementation challenges (EIGE, 2023; UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2023). The ultimate objective is to provide a strategic assessment that can inform future policy refinements and targeted interventions to foster more equitable and sustainable development outcomes in the water sector. The scope of this analysis is constrained by limited **gender-disaggregated data** related to water resource use and management in Croatia, although it is the first time gender-disaggregated data is analysed in water sector in Croatia.

### 1.3. Hypothesis for Gender Analysis in Croatia's Water Sector

**The central hypothesis guiding this review is:** *Croatia has established a robust constitutional and legislative framework for gender equality and demonstrates formal compliance with international and EU standards, yet the translation of these commitments into substantive, systemic outcomes within the water sector remains uneven.* This situation suggests that

Croatia has met the formal, performative requirements of international agreements, also its commitment to substantive gender equality still needs work.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Approach and Data Sources Utilized

This desk review was conducted through a systematic examination of readily available documents, reports, and policy papers pertinent to gender equality and water sector management in Croatia. The analysis relies exclusively on a curated list of authentic, official sources, including reports and data from government bodies, Croatian Waters, EU institutions such as the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), UN entities (CEDAW reports), and credible academic and non-governmental reports (UN Women, 2020; EIGE, 2023). This approach ensures that the findings are substantiated by reliable evidence and adhere to the requirement for using authoritative sources. Structured interview was conducted with the managerial representative of the Croatian Waters to confirm the desk review findings. The questionnaire was assembled according to UNESCO WWAP Toolkit on Sex-disaggregated Water Data (Annex 1).

### 2.2. Application of the "Water as an Asset, Service, and Space" Framework

The analysis is systematically structured around the "Water as an Asset, Service, and Space" framework, which is utilized globally within the context of **Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)**. IWRM is defined as a cross-sectoral policy approach designed to replace traditional, fragmented sectoral management, recognizing water as an integral component of the ecosystem, a natural resource, and a social and economic good (GWP, 2011).

This framework facilitates a holistic examination of gender relations across three distinct dimensions:

- **Asset:** Focused on access to, control over, and economic benefits derived from water resources and the water economy (e.g., professional employment and leadership).
- **Service:** Examines the gendered responsibilities and burdens related to the practical provision and household management of water (e.g., time poverty, utility management).
- **Space:** Assesses women's representation and substantive influence within decision-making bodies, policy formulation, and governance structures (e.g., institutional power).

Its utility lies in assisting planners and decision-makers to analyse the different roles and responsibilities of women and men, thereby ensuring that policies and programs encourage equal involvement and address gender equality substantively (GWA, 2006). By applying this framework, the report extracts and categorizes relevant information from the provided documents, ensuring a consistent analytical lens for assessing gender inequalities specifically within the Croatian context.

### 2.3. Limitations of the Research

As primarily a desk review, this analysis is limited by its primary reliance on existing secondary data. The findings are based on documents that may vary in terms of detail, recency, and the extent to which they include gender disaggregation. Also, the findings were confirmed by the in-depth interview with the representative of Croatian Waters, a critical challenge identified is the lack of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data in certain areas, like on participation in field activities or operational assignments, as well as records on participation in projects, trainings, or working groups. This absence creates an incomplete picture, potentially obscuring specific gendered impacts and limiting the precision of policy recommendations.

## 3. Overview of Gender Equality and Water Governance in Croatia

### 3.1. Demographics and Socio-Economic Landscape: The Context of Declining and Aging Population

Croatia's demographic profile significantly influences its gender dynamics, primarily characterized by a declining and aging population. The **2021 Census** recorded a resident population of **3,871,833** people, marking a dramatic decline of **9.64%** over the preceding decade, the largest decrease ever recorded in the nation's history (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Further analysis of the 2021 population estimate reveals a significant gender imbalance driven by differential life expectancy and out migration. Out of a total estimated population of 3,878,981 inhabitants, **2,011,026 (51.8%) were women** and **1,867,955 (48.2%) were men** (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

The gender composition varies significantly by age, compounding socio-economic vulnerabilities. While adult female literacy stood remarkably high at **99.8% in 2021** (EIGE, 2023), women live significantly longer, with life expectancy for females reaching **81.8 years in 2023** compared to **75.4 years** for males (INED, 2023) and constitute a disproportionately large share of the elderly population. Specifically, the population aged **65 and over** constitutes **22.9%** of the total population (**2023** estimate) (EIGE, 2023). The sex ratio for those aged over 65 years drops significantly to **0.64 males per 1 female** (EIGE, 2023). This results in a growing cohort of older women who are more likely to face economic precarity, exacerbated by the substantial gender pension gap of **24.8% recorded in 2022** (Eurostat, 2022). The combined effects of population decline, advanced aging, and high longevity among women places immense strain on the state's fiscal capacity and future care systems. If policies fail to secure economic independence for women throughout their lives, this large group of older women will face magnified vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, Croatia holds an EU record high percentage of youth still living with their parents (**92% of males and 84% of females** under 29) (EIGE, 2023), confirming a prolonged period of economic dependency. Croatia leads all EU member states in the average age young people leave the parental home, at **31.3 years** (Eurostat, 2024), compared to the EU average of 26.2 years (Eurostat, 2024). This prolonged period of economic dependency, often linked to issues of housing affordability and limited employment opportunities, is significant because it reinforces traditional gender roles within multi-generational households. It becomes increasingly likely that young women are expected to contribute disproportionately to unpaid

domestic and care work, further inhibiting their ability to translate their high educational attainment into full-time professional careers (World Bank, 2020).

### 3.2. Analysing Croatia's Legal Framework for Gender Equality

In Croatia the country's women have successfully accumulated higher human capital; women account for **59.9% of university graduates** and **55.4% of PhD holders** (EIGE, 2023). However, this investment is systematically undervalued in the labor market. The female employment rate, which stood at **65.0%** in **2023**, remains low, ranking the **fifth lowest in the EU** (Eurostat, 2023), despite an overall increase in employment rates since 2013 (World Bank, 2024). This substantial structural barrier, often driven by stereotyping and labor market discrimination (World Bank, 2020), signals a profound failure to translate educational endowments into economic empowerment.

The **Gender Equality Act** (Official Gazette 82/08, 69/17) mandates gender mainstreaming, but without the institutional "teeth" of sanctions or the financial foundation of mandated **gender budgeting** (US Department of State, 2023). The state prioritizes legislation over substantive implementation. For example, while the state financially supports the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality, the 2023 annual expenditure saw **45.6% spent on administrative costs** (EIGE, 2023), suggesting a high ratio of maintenance cost compared to substantive operational impact or outreach, demonstrating institutional inertia over action. Nevertheless, legal protections are continually strengthened, such as the new package of regulations introduced in **2024**, which included **amendments to introduce femicide as a specific criminal offense and to define gender-based violence** in the **Criminal Code** (Official Gazette 125/11, 144/12, 56/15, 61/15, 101/17, 118/18, 126/19, 84/21, 114/23, 36/24) , alongside revisions to the **Act on Protection against Domestic Violence** (Official Gazette 70/17, 126/19, 84/21, 114/22, 36/24) and the **Criminal Procedure Act** (Official Gazette 152/08, 76/09, 80/11, 121/11, 91/12, 143/12, 56/13, 145/13, 152/14, 70/17, 126/19, 130/20, 80/22, 36/24, 72/25). These amendments represent key steps in the legal protection of women and recognition of the specificities of this form of violence. Nevertheless, the challenge remains the consistent application of the law, as well as further education of the judiciary and police to ensure that women who report violence receive adequate protection and perpetrators of violence receive adequate punishment (BaBe, 2024).

Also, in 2024 Croatia amended the Companies Act (Official Gazette 111/93, 121/99, 52/00, 118/03, 107/07, 146/08, 137/09, 125/11, 152/11, 111/12, 68/13, 110/15, 40/19, 34/22, 114/22, 18/23, 130/23, 136/24). The law now includes provisions for improving gender balance on corporate boards of listed companies, aligning with EU Directive (EU) 2022/2381. The so called "Women on Boards" Directive aims to ensure that at least 40% of non-executive board seats or 33% of all board seats for listed companies are occupied by the "underrepresented sex" by the end of June 2026. The law also includes other corporate governance measures based on OECD recommendations, which apply to all companies in Croatia.

Additionally, in 2025 Croatia adopted the Act on Legal Entities Owned by the Republic of Croatia (Official Gazette 102/2025) that entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2025. This law primarily concerns corporate governance reforms for state-owned enterprises, including

redefining the roles of management and supervisory boards and the legal departments of these entities. It does not have specific clauses about gender issues itself, but it may be indirectly impacted by other laws that mandate gender equality. The new law, alongside the existing gender equality legislation, reflects a broader trend in Croatian policy to strengthen gender equality and transparent corporate governance.

### 3.3. Water Sector Management Structure

**The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Green Transition of the Republic of Croatia** is the institution responsible for water policy in Croatia. The Ministry implements national policy regarding the protection of water, sea and coastal areas, water resources, water use, irrigation and protection from the harmful effects of water and harmonisation with EU policies relevant to water and the sea. It is also responsible for development of public water supply and public wastewater disposal activities, including the process of restructuring and consolidation in the water services sector and implementation of investments in projects for the development of water utility infrastructure, flood protection and irrigation with national and EU funds. The Ministry has the Water Management and See Protection Directorate which manages the above listed activities, and currently (2025) both the Ministry and the Water Management and See Protection Directorate are led by women (Marija Vučković, Elizabeta Kos).

**Hrvatske vode** (Croatian Waters), are the legal entity for water management in Croatia, established by the Water Act (Official Gazette 66/19 and 84/21). The founder of Croatian Waters is the State or Republic of Croatia. The legal status of the institution is interpreted as a sui generis to which the regulations applicable to institutions apply subordinately. The governing body of the institution is the Management Board, and the General Manager is in charge of managing operations. The presence of 2 women, Ms. Marija Vučković and Ms. Bernardica Rubčić on the Management Board of Croatian Waters, out of seven members (28,57%) (Hrvatske vode, 2025) with Ms. Vučković being the Charwomen of the Board is a positive sign for gender equality in Croatian Waters.

According to the Gender Equality Act, article 11, state administration bodies and legal entities in majority state ownership are obliged to implement special measures and adopt action plans for the promotion and establishment of gender equality. Every four years, these bodies adopt action plans based on an analysis of the position of women and men. They determine the reasons for the introduction of special measures, goals to be achieved, methods of implementing the goals and the methods of monitoring the implementation. Action plans are previously approved by the Office for Gender Equality of the Government of the Republic of Croatia. Croatian Waters accordingly adopted The Action Plan for the Promotion and Establishment of Gender Equality for the period 2023–2026. It provides a formal framework for gender equality and includes sex-disaggregated data, enabling an assessment of institutional gender balance.

At the institutional level, Croatian Waters employ a total of 1,202 staff members (Table 1), of whom 563 are women (46.8%) and 639 are men (53.2%). This indicates a relatively balanced overall gender structure, with a slight predominance of male employees.

**TABLE 1 GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES**

Organizational unit	Total	Permanent employment	Fixed-term employment	Women	Men
Directorate	316	297	19	193	123
Danube and lower Drava	100	93	7	50	50
Middle and lower Sava	166	157	9	96	70
Northern Adriatic basins	92	90	2	52	40
Southern Adriatic basins	131	118	13	73	58
Mura and upper Drava	64	59	5	34	30
Upper Sava	87	83	4	57	30
Department for hydrotechnical facilities	246	237	9	8	238
Total	1202	1134	68	563	639

Source: Action Plan for the Promotion and Establishment of Gender Equality for the Period 2023-2026, Croatian Waters, 2023

Gender distribution in managerial positions (Table 2) shows that men are significantly more represented in these positions. Among the General Director and Deputy Directors (3 positions), women are not represented (0%), while men occupy all positions (100%). Similarly, all four Deputy Director positions within Water Management Departments (VGOs) are held by men. At the level of directors of Water Management Departments, women occupy one out of six positions (16.7%). In contrast, greater gender balance is observed at middle-management levels: women account for 53.3% of Sector Heads and 75% of Heads of Central Services. Among Heads of Services within VGOs and the Department for Hydraulic Structures, women represent 44%, while at the level of Heads of Water Management Branches (VGI), women account for 21.9%. Overall, out of 100 managerial positions, 37 are held by women and 63 by men.

**TABLE 2 GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF MANAGEMENT POSITIONS**

Management positions	Total	Women		Men	
		Number	%	Number	%

General Director and Deputy Directors	3	0	0%	3	100%
Directors of Water Management Departments	6	1	16,67%	5	83,33%
Deputy directors of Water Management Departments (VGOs)	4	0	0%	4	100%
Sector Heads	15	8	53,33%	7	46,67%
Heads of Central Services	4	3	75%	1	25%
Heads of Services within VGOs and the Department for Hydraulic Structures	43	19	44%	24	55,81%
Heads of Water Management Branches (VGI)	32	7	19%	25	78,13%
Total	100	37	37%	63	63%

Source: Action Plan for the Promotion and Establishment of Gender Equality for the Period 2023-2026, Croatian Waters, 2023

Gender distribution by educational qualification show that women are well represented at higher education levels, accounting for 53.3% of staff holding doctoral degrees and 50% of those with a master's degree or university specialist qualification. Among employees with a university degree or equivalent, women constitute 54.5%, indicating a slight female majority at this level of professional qualification. In contrast, men predominate at lower and vocational education levels, including secondary education (61.8% male), skilled and highly skilled workers (73.3% male), and non-qualified positions (55.6% male). Overall, women represent 46.8% of total staff, suggesting that despite strong female representation in higher education categories, this is not fully reflected across all occupational and hierarchical levels, highlighting potential career progression barriers.

**TABLE 3 GENDER DISTRIBUTION BY EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION**

Professional qualifications	Total	Women		Men	
		Number	%	Number	%
PhD	15	8	53,33%	7	46,67%
MR/univ.spec.	16	8	50%	8	50%
VSS/mag.	569	310	54,48%	259	45,52%
VŠS/univ.bacc.	156	66	42,31%	90	57,69%
SSS	403	154	38,21%	249	61,79%
KV/VKV	15	4	26,67%	11	73,33%
PKV	1	1	100%	0	0%
NSS	27	12	44,44%	15	55,56%
Total	1202	563	46,84%	639	53,16%

Source: Action Plan for the Promotion and Establishment of Gender Equality for the Period 2023-2026, Croatian Waters, 2023

Croatian Waters Action Plan emphasises that the level of underrepresentation of women is not particularly pronounced, especially considering the nature of the activities carried out by Croatian Waters. These activities include water management involving field work and consequently a large number of water guards, machine operators and other field workers employed at pumping stations and other hydraulic structures, as well as flood protection measures. One of the reasons for the lower number of female employees derives from the core activities of Croatian Waters and can be linked to existing trends of higher male enrolment in civil engineering, geodesy, mechanical engineering and other technical faculties. This is reflected in sectors engaged in the core activities of Croatian Waters (protection against harmful effects of water, the main flood defence centre and water use), where men predominate. Conversely, in faculties of social sciences such as law, economics, communications and journalism, such stereotypes are less prevalent and women are more represented, which is reflected in higher female employment in sectors dealing with these activities (legal affairs, finance, procurement, office administration, planning and public water management services). Notably, sectors dealing with EU projects, including their preparation and implementation, employ predominantly women, with their share ranging between 63% and 70%. Among the organisational units within the Directorate, women outnumber men in 11 out of 16 sectors. The underrepresentation of women is more pronounced in the Department for Hydraulic Structures, which, due to the nature of its work (maintenance of pumping stations, dams and other hydraulic structures, water guarding activities), shows significant underrepresentation of women in three out of four organisational units, arising from the nature of the work performed.

The Action Plan defines objectives, measures, indicators, and responsibilities aimed at promoting equal opportunities, preventing discrimination, and strengthening gender mainstreaming across Croatian Waters, thereby confirming compliance with gender-responsive policy requirements.

It does not identify a dedicated or earmarked budget line for gender equality measures. Planned activities related to gender equality are intended to be implemented within existing organisational and financial resources, without explicit budget allocation for gender-focused actions.

At the operational level, the Plan does not indicate that Croatian Waters systematically collect sex-disaggregated data on participation in field activities or operational assignments. They collect data for all employees, but not sex-disaggregated data. Likewise, there is no explicit reference to maintaining sex-disaggregated records on participation in projects, trainings, or working groups.

In terms of institutional capacities and mechanisms, the Action Plan assigns responsibility to the Legal and Human Resources Sector for the coordination, monitoring, and reporting of gender equality measures in Croatian Waters. This effectively establishes a gender focal point function within Croatian Waters, responsible for overseeing the implementation of gender-responsive measures. The document further recognises capacity-building as a key element of gender equality promotion. It envisages awareness-raising activities and training for

employees on gender equality, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities, indicating that gender-related training is planned as part of internal capacity development.

The Action Plan emphasises monitoring and reporting on the implementation of gender equality measures, but it does not describe fully standardised or institutionalised procedures for the systematic collection and integration of sex-disaggregated data across all institutional and operational activities. This suggests that gender-disaggregated data collection systems are only partially developed and represent an area for further institutional strengthening.

#### 4. Gender Analysis of the Water Sector in Croatia: Applying the IWRM Framework

The following analysis applies the "Water as an Asset, Service, and Space" framework to the available data, demonstrating how broader national gender inequalities are replicated and exacerbated within the water sector.

##### 4.1. Water as an Asset: Economic Opportunities, Control, and the Widening Wage Gap

Water as an Asset concerns access to and control over the economic benefits derived from the water sector. In Croatia, the systemic depreciation of women's high human capital is evident in labor market outcomes, a pattern that is inferred to be pervasive within technical sectors like water management.

Despite women's strong educational performance (59.9% of university graduates) (EIGE, 2023), they face deep structural barriers to achieving parity in economic power. The consequences of this exclusion are quantified by the persistent and widening gender wage gap, which reached **11.1% in average wages in 2021** (Eurostat, 2021). This disparity is not simply a matter of differing working hours; it is a profound financial disincentive for women to pursue continuous, high-wage professional engagement, particularly in demanding, technical fields like water engineering or resource planning, which are typically male-dominated.

Furthermore, occupational segregation and the disproportionate burden of care force many women into precarious, part time work, where the financial penalty is even more severe. The gender wage gap for part time jobs in Croatia reached **21.6% in 2022**, representing the highest level in the entire EU (Eurostat, 2022). Since women constitute **60% of all part time workers** (Eurostat, 2022), this extreme disparity directly penalizes them for fulfilling care responsibilities. There is also a **24.8% gender pension gap in 2022** in Croatia (Eurostat, 2022). This structural penalty limits women's ability to transition their higher educational capital into professional control within the water economy.

**TABLE 4 THE CROATIAN GENDER PARADOX: HUMAN CAPITAL VS. LABOR MARKET OUTCOMES**

Indicator	Women's Status	Disparity/Gap	Source /Year
University Graduates (%)	59.9%	N/A	EIGE, 2023
Female Employment Rate (Ages 20-64)	65.0%	5th lowest in EU	Eurostat, 2023
Average Gender Wage Gap (%)	N/A	11.1% (Widening)	Eurostat, 2021
Gender Pension Gap (%)	N/A	24.8%	Eurostat, 2022

Part Time Wage Gap (%)	N/A	21.6% (Highest in EU)	Eurostat, 2022
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In Croatian Waters salaries of women and men are not determined or valued on the basis of sex. For work of equal complexity and equal value, salaries are paid in accordance with job complexity classification, job coefficient, length of service, individual tax allowances, place of residence and applicable tax regulations.

#### 4.2. Water as a Service: Time Poverty, Household Management, and Unpaid Care Burden

While Croatia's developed water infrastructure eliminates the physical burden of water collection, the analysis of "Water as a Service" highlights the hidden burden of managerial and mental labor associated with household water use.

Croatia registers the **largest gender gap in the EU** concerning time spent on care, domestic work, and social activities (EIGE, 2023). This imbalance contributes to the country's low EIGE "Time" domain score of **48.6 out of 100** (EIGE, 2023), reflecting chronic time poverty for women. The impact of this burden is evident in participation rates outside the household: only **69% of women**, compared to **86% of men**, reported participating in social and individual activities three times a week or more during the reporting period (EIGE, 2022). It is logically concluded that the invisible managerial labor of handling household water utilities, including paying bills, monitoring consumption, ensuring quality for family health, and reporting infrastructure issues to municipal companies—falls disproportionately on women as part of their unpaid care work (EIGE, 2023). This persistent, unquantified time burden restricts women's time availability for formal employment, education, and political or social activities. The systemic issue driving this is the lack of affordable and high-quality child and elderly care services (World Bank, 2020), which perpetuates the caregiving role imbalance and restricts women's capacity for public engagement, directly linking the *Service* burden to limitations in the *Asset* and *Space* domains.

#### 4.3. Water as a Space: Voice and Decision-Making

The "Water as a Space" framework examines women's ability to influence water policy and management decisions. Croatia has made notable strides in political representation, with women comprising **33.1% of Members of Parliament as of April 2024** (IPU, 2024) and electing the first woman president of Croatia Kolinda Grabar Kitarović (from 2015 to 2020). In 2025 this political progress translates into influence within water sector governance structures.

The decision making space of the centralized water sector, exemplified by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Green Transition of the Republic of Croatia and Hrvatske vode, shows significant progress in 2025 in influence of women. All due to the Head of the Ministry Ms Marija Vučković who is also, by the governing Act the Chairwomen of the Croatian Waters Management Board. Also this influence in water policy and management decisions in the male-dominated water sector is a first time event, it shows positive development processes in contrast to the data from 2023 that shows Croatia's low EIGE score of 49.5 out of 100 in the Power domain (EIGE, 2023).

Also relevant to the decision making in water sector, the Office for Gender Equality of the Government of the Republic of Croatia is responsible for approving the state bodies Action Plans for the Promotion and Establishment of Gender Equality, including Croatian Waters.

## 5. Identified Gaps, Underlying Challenges, and Emerging Themes

The gender analysis of Croatia's water sector reveals a clear divergence between formal compliance with gender equality norms and the depth of their substantive implementation. While the legal and institutional framework demonstrates alignment with EU and international standards, several structural gaps, persistent challenges, and cross-cutting themes constrain the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming in water governance.

### 5.1. Systemic Deficiencies: The Legislative Failure to Mandate Enforcement and Gender Budgeting

A central gap identified across the analysis is the absence of enforceable mechanisms accompanying Croatia's strong legislative guarantees on gender equality. Although the Gender Equality Act mandates gender mainstreaming and obliges public bodies, including Croatian Waters, to adopt gender equality action plans, these obligations are not supported by sanctions for non-compliance or performance-based accountability mechanisms. As a result, gender equality functions largely as a procedural requirement rather than a binding operational standard.

This gap is further exacerbated by the absence of mandated gender budgeting. Neither national legislation nor sectoral policies require the systematic allocation of financial resources for gender equality measures. Consequently, gender-related actions within Croatian Waters are implemented within existing budgets, without earmarked funding or cost tracking. This effectively renders gender equality an unfunded mandate, limiting the scale, sustainability, and measurability of interventions and reinforcing a compliance-oriented rather than results-oriented approach.

### 5.2. Vertical Segregation and Leadership Bottlenecks in the Water Sector

Despite relatively balanced overall employment figures and strong female representation at higher educational levels, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior decision-making positions within Croatian Waters. The complete absence of women among the General Director and Deputy Directors, and among Deputy Directors of Water Management Departments, points to persistent vertical segregation.

This pattern suggests the existence of informal barriers to career progression, often described as a "glass ceiling," whereby women's human capital is not translated into institutional power. While women dominate middle-management and support-oriented leadership roles, strategic and operational command positions remain male-dominated. This segmentation limits women's substantive influence over resource allocation, infrastructure priorities, and long-term planning within the water sector, thereby constraining the "Water as a Space" dimension of gender equality.

### 5.3. Occupational Segregation Linked to Gendered Educational and Labour Market Pathways

The analysis identifies occupational segregation as a structural challenge underpinning gender imbalances in the water sector. Core technical and field-based functions—such as flood protection, hydraulic structure maintenance, and water guarding—are heavily male-dominated, reflecting broader gendered patterns in STEM education and technical professions in Croatia.

While the physical nature of certain tasks is frequently cited as a justification, these framing risks naturalising gender roles rather than interrogating institutional norms, recruitment practices, and workplace design. Conversely, women are strongly concentrated in legal, financial, administrative, and EU-funded project units, which, while influential, are often perceived as auxiliary rather than core operational functions.

#### 5.4. Insufficient Sex-Disaggregated Data for Operational Decision-Making

A significant cross-cutting gap identified is the partial and inconsistent collection of sex-disaggregated data. While Croatian Waters collect gender-disaggregated data on staffing and managerial positions, this practice does not extend systematically to operational domains such as field assignments, participation in projects, trainings, working groups, or emergency response activities.

This data limitation constrains evidence-based policy making and weakens monitoring and evaluation of gender equality measures. Without comprehensive sex-disaggregated operational data, gendered patterns of exposure, workload, skill development, and professional visibility remain obscured, limiting the institution's capacity to identify inequalities and design targeted corrective measures.

#### 5.5. Persistence of Gendered Time Poverty and Its Spillover Effects on the Water Sector

At the societal level, Croatia's pronounced gender gap in unpaid care and domestic work constitutes a critical underlying challenge that directly affects women's participation and advancement in the water sector. Women's disproportionate responsibility for household management, including water-related tasks, contributes to chronic time poverty and restricts their availability for full-time employment, field-based assignments, overtime work, and leadership roles.

This dynamic reinforces horizontal and vertical segregation within the sector and helps explain why women, despite high educational attainment, are less represented in senior and operationally demanding positions. The water sector thus mirrors and reproduces broader societal inequalities, demonstrating the interdependence of the "Water as Service," "Asset," and "Space" dimensions.

#### 5.6. Intersectional Vulnerabilities and the Legacy of Conflict

The complexity of gender discrimination in Croatia is compounded by intersectional factors, particularly the lasting legacy of the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995). International reports, including those from CEDAW, note that specific groups face multiple forms of discrimination, notably **ethnic minority women (including Roma and Serbs), rural women,**

**and women with disabilities** (UN Women, 2020). These women often experience compounded exclusion from economic and decision-making spaces, including local water management governance.

The profound trauma stemming from the use of mass rape as a method of ethnic cleansing during the war remains a critical factor, creating profound and ongoing vulnerabilities for survivors (CEDAW, 1995). Furthermore, the war had a measurable gendered impact on the civilian population: women accounted for **20% of all killed civilians** and **23% of all wounded civilians**, with **12% of wounded women suffering disabilities** (CEDAW, 1995). Organizations like the Centre for Women War Victims – ROSA, a non-governmental, feminist, and anti-militaristic organization founded in **1992**, provide vital, multifaceted support to those affected by conflict (UN Women, 2020; The Advocates for Human Rights, 2018). ROSA's mission is to empower women and combat violence by providing **free legal and psychological assistance, court accompaniment, and practical aid (such as securing accommodation and employment)** to survivors of **sexual and other forms of war violence, sexual violence in peace, trafficking, and exploitation**, advocating for their rights regardless of nationality or ethnicity (NHC Women's Rights Organization, 2025; Autonomous Women's House Zagreb & Centre for Women War Victims – ROSA, 2024; The Advocates for Human Rights, 2018).). Standard gender policies are insufficient to address these complex needs. Consequently, any national policy, including those related to water, must adopt an intersectional, trauma-informed lens to ensure equitable resource distribution and employment opportunities in disadvantaged regions, counteracting historical socio-economic discrimination that tends to prioritize investments in dominant urban centers over marginalized rural and war-affected areas.

### 5.7. Emerging Theme: Centralised Leadership as a Catalyst for Change

An emerging and noteworthy theme is the role of centralised leadership in shaping gender outcomes within the water sector. The simultaneous leadership of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Green Transition and the Management Board of Croatian Waters by a woman represents a significant departure from historical patterns in a traditionally male-dominated sector.

While this concentration of influence should not be interpreted as systemic transformation, it signals the potential impact of leadership on institutional culture, agenda-setting, and symbolic change. It also highlights the fragility of progress that relies on individual actors rather than embedded institutional mechanisms, reinforcing the need for structural safeguards to ensure continuity beyond individual mandates.

### 5.8. Strategic Linkages: Leveraging Women's Environmental Consciousness

An emerging theme provides a significant strategic opportunity for sustainable water management. Empirical research in Croatia indicates that women exhibit a significantly **higher degree of environmental consciousness** and environmentally positive behaviours compared to men. Specifically, women demonstrate greater concern for environmental issues in the country, show more support for policies aimed at recycling, and hold a more positive outlook toward health problems caused by ecological problems (Mandarić & Hunjet, 2024). This

higher eco-awareness is demonstrated by women showing greater concern for environmental issues, stronger support for policies aimed at recycling, and a more positive outlook toward health problems caused by ecological issues (Mandarić & Hunjet, 2024). This finding has direct implications for water policy.

This demonstrated environmental consciousness can be strategically leveraged by the water sector. By framing water policies and awareness campaigns around sustainability, household water conservation, and climate change adaptation, targeting women and appealing to their existing stewardship role, policymakers can generate effective behavioural change (Mandarić & Hunjet, 2024). This approach strategically shifts the policy narrative from viewing women solely as vulnerable beneficiaries to recognizing them as powerful, existing agents of sustainable development and change.

## 6. Conclusion and Strategic Insights for Future Interventions

This gender analysis of Croatia's water sector confirms the central hypothesis of the report: Croatia has established a robust constitutional and legislative framework for gender equality and demonstrates formal compliance with international and EU standards, yet the translation of these commitments into substantive, systemic outcomes within the water sector remains uneven. The findings illustrate a governance model in which gender equality is institutionally acknowledged, procedurally integrated, and symbolically visible, but not yet fully embedded as a resourced, measurable, and enforceable dimension of water management.

### 6.1. Concluding Assessment

The Croatian water sector operates within a strong normative environment that mandates gender equality and gender mainstreaming. Croatian Waters has complied with these requirements through the adoption of a Gender Equality Action Plan, the collection of sex-disaggregated employment data, and the establishment of internal coordination mechanisms. Women are well represented among highly educated staff and in several middle-management roles, and recent leadership configurations demonstrate that women can occupy influential positions within the sector.

However, the analysis also reveals persistent structural constraints. The absence of gender budgeting, limited accountability mechanisms, incomplete sex-disaggregated operational data, and entrenched occupational and vertical segregation significantly reduce the transformative potential of existing policies. Gender equality measures are largely implemented within existing organisational structures and budgets, without explicit financial backing or performance incentives. As a result, gender mainstreaming remains predominantly compliance-driven rather than outcome-oriented.

The application of the "Water as an Asset, Service, and Space" framework demonstrates that inequalities in the water sector cannot be understood in isolation from broader socio-economic conditions. Women's restricted access to economic power ("Asset"), disproportionate unpaid care burdens ("Service"), and constrained influence in senior decision-making ("Space") are mutually reinforcing. These dynamics limit women's capacity

to fully participate in and shape water governance, despite their high levels of education and professional competence.

## 6.2. Strategic Insights for Future Interventions

Based on the identified gaps and emerging themes, several strategic insights can inform future policy refinement and targeted interventions in Croatia's water sector:

- **Strengthening accountability mechanisms:** Future interventions should focus on complementing existing legal obligations with enforceable accountability measures. This may include clearer performance indicators for gender mainstreaming, integration of gender equality objectives into institutional evaluation frameworks, and strengthened oversight of Action Plan implementation. Without such mechanisms, gender equality risks remaining a formal requirement rather than a governance priority.
- **Introducing gender-responsive budgeting in the water sector:** The absence of gender budgeting represents a critical leverage point for reform. Integrating gender-responsive budgeting into water sector planning and investment processes would enable the alignment of policy commitments with financial resources. Even pilot initiatives within Croatian Waters—such as tracking expenditures related to training, leadership development, or workplace adaptation—could significantly enhance transparency and effectiveness.
- **Expanding systematic collection of sex-disaggregated operational data:** Future interventions should prioritise the development of comprehensive data systems that extend beyond staffing statistics. Systematic collection of sex-disaggregated data on field assignments, project participation, training, emergency response, and career progression would enable evidence-based decision-making and more precise targeting of gender equality measures.
- **Addressing vertical and horizontal segregation through institutional measures:** Targeted actions are needed to reduce gender segregation across both leadership levels and occupational roles. These may include transparent promotion criteria, mentorship and leadership programmes for women in technical fields, and organisational reviews of recruitment and task allocation practices. Such measures would support a more equitable distribution of authority and professional opportunities within the water sector.
- **Linking water governance reforms with broader care and social policies:** Given the strong influence of unpaid care responsibilities on women's professional participation, gender equality interventions in the water sector should be aligned with wider social policies on childcare, eldercare, and work-life balance. Without addressing these structural constraints, sector-specific measures will have limited impact.
- **Institutionalising gender expertise beyond individual leadership:** The current visibility of women in senior leadership positions demonstrates the potential for change but also highlights institutional vulnerability to leadership turnover. Future interventions should therefore focus on embedding gender expertise, procedures, and responsibilities within organisational structures to ensure continuity and sustainability beyond individual mandates.

- **Leverage Women's Environmental Engagement:** Policymakers should capitalize on women's demonstrated **higher degree of environmental consciousness** (Mandarić & Hunjet, 2024) by actively involving them in awareness-raising and educational activities related to water conservation and sustainable water management, positioning them as key agents in national climate change adaptation strategies.
- **Adopt Intersectional Planning:** Water governance and infrastructure investment must adopt an intersectional lens, ensuring that resource distribution and employment opportunities counteract historical marginalization and support the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including ethnic minority women and those in rural and war-affected regions (UN Women, 2020).

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### Annex 1: Questionnaire - Croatian Waters based on UNESCO WWAP (World Water Assessment Programme) Questionnaire for the collection of sex-disaggregated water data - Toolkit on Sex-disaggregated Water Data

- I. Sex-disaggregated data – institutional level (World Water Assessment Programme indicators)**
  1. State the total number of female and male employees at Croatian Waters (WWAP: *Staff by sex*).
  2. State the number of women and men in managerial positions by management level (WWAP: *Staff in management by sex*).
  3. Are there institutional guidelines, plans, or policies that include a gender-responsive approach (WWAP: *Gender policy existence*)?
  4. Is there a dedicated budget line for activities related to gender equality (WWAP: *Budget allocation for gender actions*)?
- II. Sex-disaggregated data – operational level (WWAP indicators)**
  5. Do you collect data on the participation of women and men in field activities (WWAP: *Operational workforce by sex*)?
  6. Do you keep records of the participation of women and men in projects, trainings, and working groups (WWAP: *Participants by sex*)?
  7. Do you collect data on service beneficiaries disaggregated by sex (WWAP: *Service beneficiaries by sex*)?
- III. Capacities, training, and institutional mechanisms**
  8. Is there a designated person or department responsible for gender-responsive policy (WWAP: *Gender focal point*)?
  9. Are trainings on gender equality conducted (WWAP: *Gender training*)?
  10. Are there standardized procedures for collecting sex-disaggregated data (WWAP: *Data collection systems*)?



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