



**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

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Content

Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction	5
1.1. Context and Background of Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina	5
Purpose and Scope	5
1.3. Hypothesis for Gender Analysis in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Water Sector	6
2. Methodology	6
2.1. Approach and Data Sources Utilized	6
2.2. Application of the "Water as an Asset, Service, and Space" Framework	6
2.3. Limitations of the Desk Review.....	7
3. Overview of Gender Equality and Water Governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina	7
3.1. Demographics and Socio-Economic Landscape.....	7
3.2. Gender (in-)equality	8
Women and labor market	9
Gender pay gap.....	10
Self-employment	10
3.3. National Legal and Policy Frameworks for Gender Equality.....	11
3.4. Water Sector Management Structure and Reforms	12
Institutional setup.....	12
Legislative and policy setup	13
The Policy-Implementation Gap: From Law to Practice	14
Unpacking Institutional Culture and Water Sector Management	14
4. Gender Analysis of the Water Sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Key Findings	15
4.1. Water as an Asset: Access, Control, and Economic Opportunities.....	15
4.2. Water as a Service: Time and Health Burden	16
4.3. Water as a Space: Voice and Decision Making	16
5. Identified Gaps, Underlying Challenges, and Emerging Themes	17
5.1. Disconnect Between Policy and Practice.....	17
5.2. Data Deficiencies and Monitoring Challenges	17
5.3. Intersectional Vulnerabilities and Their Impact.....	18
5.4. Broader Socio-Economic and Environmental Linkages.....	18
6. Conclusion and Strategic Insights for Future Interventions	19
References	20

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1 Key Demographic and Socio-Economic Indicators by Gender in Bosnia and Herzegovina.....	7
TABLE 2 Gender gap on labor market. 2022.....	9
TABLE 3 Highest level of education by gender. 2019	10
TABLE 4 Policy Vs Implementation	14
TABLE 5 Gender Analysis of Water Sector	15
TABLE 6 Vulnerability & Its Impact	18

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina	8
FIGURE 2 Gender gap	10

ACRONYMS (a selection)

BD (BiH)	Brčko District, Bosnia and Herzegovina
BHAS	Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CEC	Central Election Committee (of Bosnia and Herzegovina)
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CEIC	CEIC Data (statistical/economic database)
DIKTAS	Dinaric Karst Aquifer System
DIKTAS II	Dinaric Karst Aquifer System (Phase II / “DIKTAS II” project)
EU	European Union
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
FIGAP	Financial Mechanism for the Implementation of the Gender Action Plan of BiH
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GRB	Gender-Responsive Budgeting
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LLC	Limited Liability Company
NEETS	Not in Employment, Education or Training
RS	Republika Srpska
SAP	Strategic Action Programme
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UN	United Nations
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
WEDC	Water, Engineering and Development Centre (referenced as “WEDC Knowledge”)
WEF	World Economic Forum
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council

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Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive desk review of the gender dynamics within **Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH)** water sector, synthesizing findings from official sources (Government, UN, World Bank, etc.). The analysis reveals a complex and contradictory landscape: while BiH has a **robust legal and institutional framework** for gender equality, its practical application is undermined by systemic challenges.

The primary finding is a significant **disconnect between policy and reality** on the ground, driven by **deeply ingrained traditional gender roles**. This failure is quantifiable:

- **Political Exclusion (Water as a Space):** Despite a 40% electoral gender quota introduced in 2013, women held only **19.1%** of parliamentary seats as of February 2024 (Equal Future Eurasia, 2024), the lowest point since 2010. This low representation mirrors their absence from technical water governance bodies.
- **Economic Disadvantage (Water as an Asset):** Women constitute the majority of unpaid family workers, with **11.3%** in Republika Srpska and **14.4%** in Brčko District (Agency for Gender Equality of BiH, 2018). This leads to economic disadvantages, such as a **22% to 24% gender pay gap** (Borgen Project, 2023), and increased financial dependence.
- **Service Burden (Water as a Service):** Only **46%** of the population has access to safely managed drinking water (UN Women, 2022), with the resulting burden of water collection and household management falling disproportionately on women, leading to "time poverty."

This review identifies three cores, interlocking barriers to effective gender mainstreaming in water sector governance and management:

- **Pervasive Social Norms:** Cultural beliefs about women's primary role as caregivers lead to their high levels of inactivity and interrupt their work patterns, limiting their economic independence and influence (UN Women, 2024).
- **Critical Data Deficit:** A persistent lack of reliable, **gender-disaggregated data** and comparable methodologies in key areas (unpaid care work, access to assets) makes it impossible to formulate evidence-based policies, monitor progress effectively, and enforce the legal mandate to collect such data (UN Women, 2022).
- **Institutional Implementation Gap:** Despite the strong mandate from the **Law on Gender Equality (2003)**, the water sector's "heavy focus on engineering" causes gender issues to be seen as "irrelevant or marginal" (WEDC Knowledge, 2014). This institutional bias, coupled with insufficient resource allocation, hinders the practical application of gender-sensitive approaches.

Based on these findings, the report concludes with strategic, multi-level recommendations aimed at bridging the policy-to-practice gap, including mandating the systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data, implementing **Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB)**, and strengthening implementation capacities to challenge traditional gender stereotypes in the water sector.

1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Background of Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Gender mainstreaming has been a sustained and ongoing activity within Bosnia and Herzegovina's legislative and strategic frameworks, driven by a multi-year strategic approach from gender institutional mechanisms at all levels of government (UN Women, 2022; UNECE, 2022). This means that gender equality is intended to be a foundational principle, integrated into the planning and implementation of all public policies, strategies, and regulations (UNECE, 2022). The primary policy document for this is the national Gender Action Plan (GAP), which is periodically prepared by the Gender Equality Agency of BiH based on proposals from ministries and gender centres (UNECE, 2022). Despite these commendable efforts, significant challenges persist in achieving substantive gender equality. A core societal belief in BiH is that women's family roles take precedence over employment and career pursuits (UN Women, 2022). This view is not merely cultural; it creates a direct negative feedback loop that fundamentally constrains women's economic participation and empowerment. The disproportionate burden of family responsibilities contributes to high levels of inactivity and interrupted work patterns among women, which in turn leads to significantly lower wages, with women's gross national income per capita being only **53.7%** of men's income reduced pensions, and increased financial reliance on family members (Borgen Project, n.d.; UN Women, 2022).

The prevalence of this issue is evident in employment patterns. More women than men work part time to accommodate family obligations, placing them at a distinct disadvantage in advancing their careers (UN Women, 2022). Additionally, women constitute the majority of unpaid family workers, particularly in the Republika Srpska and Brčko District, where this category of worker accounts for a significant portion of the labour force. The percentages of employed women involved in unpaid family labour are **11.3%** in Republika Srpska and **14.4%** in the Brčko District. These disparities demonstrate that despite a strong institutional commitment to gender equality, the translation of policy into tangible, on the ground change is impeded by deeply entrenched social norms and their resulting economic and social consequences. The persistence of these deeply rooted issues highlights the need for a comprehensive analysis that goes beyond legislative review to examine the systemic barriers to genuine equality.

Purpose and Scope

This report provides a comprehensive gender analysis of water sector management in Bosnia, serving as a core component (**Output 6.2**) of the **DICTAS II project**. It presents a review of the gender dynamics within Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a specific focus on their intersection with water governance. The primary aim is to offer a detailed analysis by consolidating and critically examining existing official literature and data from government agencies, the United Nations, and other key development partners. The review's purpose is to move beyond a simple summary of facts to identify systemic inconsistencies and provide a nuanced understanding of the underlying challenges that prevent the realization of gender equality in the water sector.

The scope of this report is limited to a strategic analysis of publicly available documents and data rather than an original field study. It seeks to correct disparities in reporting and establish a reliable foundation for future policy and programmatic development. The analysis applies the "**Water as an Asset, Service, and Space**" framework to conduct an initial, high-level assessment of gender dynamics within BiH's water sector, thereby laying the groundwork for more in-depth studies. The following sections will sequentially explore BiH's national policy context, the structure of its water sector, the specific gender dynamics within it, and the overarching challenge of data availability.

1.3. Hypothesis for Gender Analysis in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Water Sector

Despite Bosnia and Herzegovina's comprehensive legal framework and strategic commitment to gender mainstreaming, a significant gap between policy and practice, driven by deeply ingrained traditional gender norms, a pervasive lack of gender-disaggregated data, and an institutional focus on technical over social issues, leads to women bearing a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and limits their meaningful participation in water sector governance.

The provided material confirms a "**multiyear strategic approach to gender mainstreaming**" and a "**robust legal and institutional framework**" (UN Women, 2022). However, it also indicates a "**consistent downward trend**" in gender equality indicators (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025), suggesting that this institutional commitment is not translating into substantive change. This failure is explicitly linked to "**deeply ingrained traditional gender roles**" and a "**significant lack of gender-disaggregated data**" (UN Women, 2022). A critical observation for the water sector is the finding that gender issues are "**often seen as irrelevant or marginal**" due to a "**heavy focus on engineering**" (WEDC Knowledge, 2014). The hypothesis synthesizes these points, arguing that the disconnect between policy and reality is the central problem, and the root causes are traditional norms, data deficiencies, and institutional culture. It further posits that this disconnect directly manifests as the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and limited participation for women in the water sector.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach and Data Sources Utilized

This desk review constitutes the first phase of a broader gender analysis, specifically focusing on the systematic review of existing information. The approach involved a comprehensive examination of readily available documents, reports, and policy papers pertinent to gender equality and water sector management in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The sources utilized include reports from UN Women, government agencies (such as the Gender Equality Agency of BiH and the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry), and other international and local organizations. These sources provide a broad context, validate information, identify specific initiatives, and reveal deeper understandings of socio-economic challenges, gender dynamics, and policy implementation within BiH.

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

The analysis presented in this report is systematically structured around the "Water as an Asset, Service, and Space" framework, a widely recognized approach for conceptualizing the multifaceted relationship between water and gender. This framework provides a clear and holistic lens through which to examine gender relations across three distinct dimensions:

- **Asset:** Water is analysed as an economic resource, influencing livelihoods, economic participation, and asset accumulation.
- **Service:** Water is considered in the context of its provision and management for domestic use, a role often shouldered by women and girls, which can lead to time burdens and health impacts.
- **Space:** Water is viewed as a social and political arena where social relations and ingrained hierarchies play out, influencing women's voice and decision-making power in governance structures.

For the purpose of this desk review, the framework guided the extraction and categorization of relevant information from the provided documents. This systematic application allowed for the identification of specific gender inequalities within each pillar, ensuring consistency and alignment with an overall gender analysis methodology.

2.3. Limitations of the Desk Review

As a desk review, this analysis is inherently limited by its reliance on secondary data. The findings are based solely on existing documents, which may vary in terms of detail, recency, and the extent of gender disaggregation. This desk review represents an initial assessment, designed to lay the groundwork for future, more in-depth studies.

A particular and critical challenge identified in the provided material is the significant lack of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data in key areas (UN Women, 2022). These data gaps are particularly acute concerning unpaid care and domestic work, the gender pay gap, women's access to assets (including land), and the specific links between gender and the environment (UN Women, 2022). This pervasive data deficiency can lead to an incomplete picture in certain areas, potentially obscuring specific gendered impacts and limiting the precision of policy recommendations (UN Women, 2022). The report's analysis must therefore proceed with the acknowledgment that these data limitations are a fundamental barrier to effective monitoring and accountability (UN Women, 2022).

3. Overview of Gender Equality and Water Governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina

3.1. Demographics and Socio-Economic Landscape

Bosnia and Herzegovina's demographic profile significantly influences the dynamics of gender equality. The population is estimated at 3,269,516 in 2025 (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025; Wikipedia, n.d.). As of 2023, the total population was 3,185,073, composed of **1,670,406 females** and **1,514,667 males** (CEIC Data, 2023). This means that women make up more than **50%** of the population (CEIC Data, 2023; BH Agency for Statistics, 2022). Life expectancy in 2025 is projected to be **77.98 years** overall, with a notable gender disparity: **75.02 years** for males and 81.15 years for females (The Global Economy, n.d.; Wikipedia, n.d.). The sex ratio is 0.95 males per female overall, while at birth it is 1.07 males per female, and for those aged 65 and over it is a stark 0.42 males per female, indicating a higher proportion of older women (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Educationally, BiH exhibits high adult literacy rates, with an overall rate of 98.3% for individuals aged 15 and above (CEIC Data, 2022). While there is a slight disparity (97.1% for females versus 99.4% for males), youth literacy rates are nearly identical at **99.7% for both genders**, resulting in a **Gender Parity Index of 1.000 for youth literacy** (CEIC Data, 2022). This positive educational trend, however, does not fully translate into equitable economic participation. The available information indicates that women's professional and economic lives are often limited by a societal belief that family roles are a primary responsibility (UN Women, 2022). This leads to high levels of inactivity and interrupted work patterns, which in turn result in lower wages and reduced pensions, increasing financial dependency (UN Women, 2022). This pattern suggests a fundamental contradiction: while BiH has successfully achieved educational parity, a persistent and deeply ingrained cultural barrier acts as a "**leak pipeline**," preventing women from capitalizing on their educational achievements in the labour market.

The following table provides a comprehensive overview of key demographic and socio-economic indicators by gender in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

TABLE 1 Key Demographic and Socio-Economic Indicators by Gender in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Indicator	Male	Female
Total Population	1,595,000 (approx.)	1,674,000 (approx.)
Life Expectancy at birth	75.02 years (2025 proj.)	81.15 years (2025 proj.)
Literacy Rate (Adult)	99.4% (2022)	97.1% (2022)
Literacy Rate (Youth 15-24)	99.7% (2022)	99.7% (2022)

Sex Ratio (Total)	0.95 males/female (2022)	-
Sex Ratio (at birth)	1.07 males/female (2022)	-
Sex Ratio (65 and over)	0.42 males/female (2022)	-
Total Fertility Rate	-	1.36 children/woman (2022 est.)
Employed (Unpaid Family Workers)	Minority	Majority
Unemployment Rate	-	Higher (in some age groups)

(Data derived from UN Women, 2022, March; UNECE, 2022, February; The Global Economy, n.d.; Wikipedia, n.d.; CEIC Data, 2022; CEIC Data, 2023; Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine, 2022).

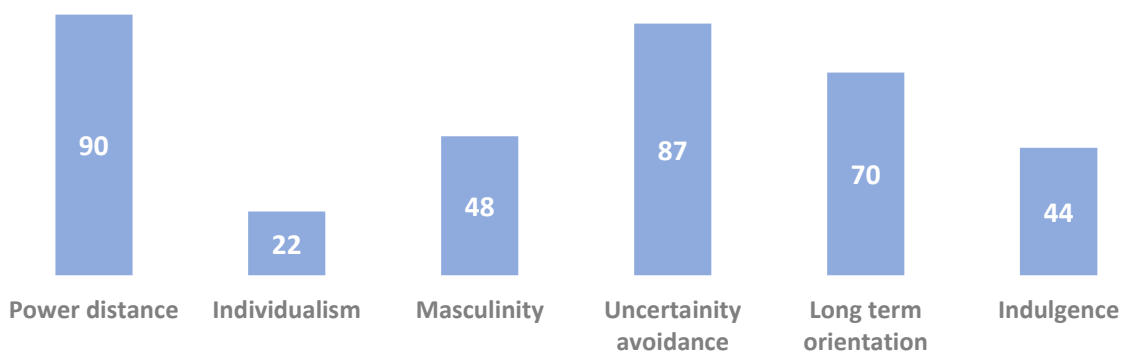
3.2. Gender (in-)equality

Gender inequality in Bosnia and Herzegovina is highly affected by gender stereotypes typical for traditional society and significant affects disparities in the economic activity and life of women in the country across most segments: secondary education, professional development and advancement, control over resources, household budget disposal, income generation, representation in political spheres and participation in leadership.

These root in the gender norms on the role of women and men in marriage where, according to the BiH Agency for Statistics (2023) 78.8 percent of married men feel that they are the head of the household, comparing to only 5.6 percent women. The difference is equally pronounced among the rural and urban population. Nevertheless, the share of unmarried women and men who feel they are the head of the household is balanced and hovers around 8 percent. These attitudes lead to imbalanced opportunities for women to participate in the economic life and that is best illustrated in the fact that, by rule, only women use parental leave and **only 42 percent women with younger children are employed on full-time basis**. In nine of ten households run by members age 45 and older, women are those that perform unpaid work in household. The gender gap is also visible in the ownership and disposal over resources. The estimates show that **men represent over 70 percent land and 74 percent dwelling owners**, 77 percent motor vehicles are registered by men and 63 percent driving licenses are obtained by men.

The reasoning behind can be elaborated using Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory that shows the effects of a society's culture on the values of its members, and how these values relate to behaviour, using a structure derived from factor analysis. According to pre-determined metrics, Bosnia and Herzegovina culture is characterized by extra-ordinary power distance (score 90) where power holders are very distant in the society and society members accept hierarchy failing to question its reasonability. At a low score (score: 22) of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a collectivist culture (score: 78) as evident in the early integration and close, long-term commitment to a strong, cohesive 'in-group'.

FIGURE 1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source: Country Comparison Tool, available at: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool>

Second highest dimension is 'uncertainty avoidance' (score: 87) and that demonstrate reluctance to changes and risk averse societal culture. Long term orientation score (70) appeals to pragmatic orientation and perceived attitude that the truth depends very much on the situation, context, and time. Feminine values slightly dominate (Masculinity score: 48) and are comparable to countries in the region, but by far distanced from Iceland as best ranked country in gender equality (Masculinity score: 10). Looking comprehensively in terms of cultural dimensions, it can be concluded that the values of women are insufficiently nurtured in society, that there is an extremely pronounced perception of the role of women and men in society, and that the power acquired by men is rarely questioned in social norms.

Bosnia and Herzegovina rank 73 in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2025) scoring 0.710 (best scoring Iceland: 0.908; worst scoring Afghanistan: 0.435) where index covers economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment and scoring 1 indicates no gap. Nevertheless, the country scores 0.589 and is ranked 116th for economic participation and opportunity, i.e., the gap arising from difference between women and men in labour force participation rates (score: 0.616), the remuneration gap (score 0.574 for wage equality and score 0.532 for estimated earned income) and the ratio of women to men among legislators, senior officials and managers (score: 0.336), technical and professional workers (score: 1). Although there is no reliable data and sex-disaggregated data are rather scarce, some estimates show devastating imbalances in the participation of women in business, where 13.0 percent firms are under majority ownership of women and 16.6 percent firms have women as top managers, scoring 3.69 in advancement of women to leadership roles (score 7 is best).

Recent RCC report (2023) determines woman entrepreneur as a small business owner, registered as a physical person rather than LLC or joint stock company, who has started a company more out of necessity rather than opportunity as a most frequent profile.

Country gender equality profile (UN Women, 2021) elaborates on gender inequality in the economic environment, referring to the discrimination of women in hiring procedures, promotion, and termination of employment, unpaid domestic work and lack of accessible care services, pursuing advanced education and skills training, gender pay gap persists, occupational segregation by gender allowing for gender stereotypes to further exclude women from occupations traditionally perceived as male. Concerning women in rural and remote areas significant impediment lays in the lack of access to and control over productive resources such as land, property, financial resources, education, marketable skills, and access to information and modern technology.

Young women and girls are especially vulnerable where the rate of youth neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETS) for women accounts to 23.0 percent and male 20.3 percent (EU average in 2022: 11.7 percent).

Women and labor market

Women make up only 38.8 percent of the active labor force in the labor market in Bosnia and Herzegovina with a share of 36 percent in the total number of employed persons, which implies a share of women of as much as 62.4 percent in the inactive working-age population (Labor force survey 2022, BHAS). Differences in the share of the active population in the total working-age population on the labor market of Bosnia and Herzegovina are especially pronounced in the population over 50 years old.

TABLE 2 Gender gap on labor market. 2022

Bosnia and Herzegovina	Men (%)	Women (%)	Gender gap (%)
Activity rate	59.6	36.1	23.5
Employment rate	52.1	28.9	23.2
Unemployment rate	12.6	19.8	7.2

Activity rate, by age

15 to 24	34.9	21.2	13.7
25 to 49	88.7	63.8	24.9
50 to 64	63.7	32.0	31.7

Source: Labour force survey BH Agency for statistics.

https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Saopštenja/2023/LAB_00_2022_Y1_1_BS.pdf

The position of women on the labor market is best illustrated by the devastating fact that almost half (46.2 percent) of working-age active women have completed elementary school. At the same time, about quarter of working-age men (26.6 percent) are those with completed primary school.

On the other hand, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina **spend more than six hours a day on unpaid care work**, while men spend just over three hours and women make 67 per cent of total unpaid household assistants that account to 1.4 of total employment (LFS, 2022) and the **share of women in informal sector is estimated to 24.58 per cent**, compared to 16.29 per cent of men (WEF, 2025).

TABLE 3 Highest level of education by gender. 2019

Highest level of education (2019)	Working-age population		Share in total employed	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Primary education	26.6	46.2	14.0	18.4
Secondary education	63.7	44.7	73.5	62.0
Higher education	10.1	9.1	12.5	19.5

Source: Labor forces survey publication BH Agency for Statistics.

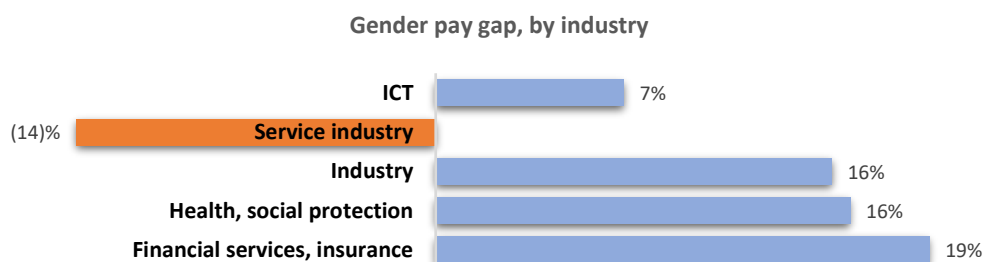
https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Bilteni/2019/LAB_00_2019_TB_0_BS.pdf

The relatively high share of women with completed primary education in the total number of employed women points to the fact that poorly paid jobs are predominantly assigned to women. On the other hand, almost a fifth (19.5 percent) of employed women are women with completed higher education.

Gender pay gap

Women are paid less in key areas that generate above-average jobs, such as financial services and insurance, information and communication technology, and healthcare. On the other hand, women are better paid than men in other, low-accumulative activities, such as providing hairdressing services.

FIGURE 2 Gender gap



Source: Labor forces survey publication BH Agency for Statistics.

https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Bilteni/2019/LAB_00_2019_TB_0_BS.pdf

Self-employment

Considering the fact that the share of unemployed women is almost twice as high as that of men, it is devastating that every twentieth woman is self-employed, that is, four times as many unemployed women are encouraged and empowered to start their own business.

Numerous studies indicate the problems of gender inequality in the domain of entrepreneurs, from laws that discriminate according to gender, sociological norms, difficult access to education and work for women, access to financing and disposal of women's income.

Estimates point that only 12.2 per cent of total firms are in female majority ownership and 15.30 percent with female top managers (WEF, 2025). In addition to knowledge, previous experience is the next important characteristic for starting a business. Women who have previous experience gained in a certain company, especially in managerial positions, start their own business more easily because they are familiar with the possibilities but also the problems they may face.

Connection with stakeholders is an important factor for every business. Finding stable sources of both material and immaterial resources is a prerequisite for business continuity. In addition to suppliers of raw materials, human resources, as the most important resource in business, should also be available to the entrepreneur in a timely manner. In situations of accelerated business growth, it is necessary to find adequate staff who have the necessary knowledge and experience.

Entrepreneurial networks, associations of women entrepreneurs, as well as personal contacts can provide valuable information. Although there are business incubators in BiH that provide assistance to start-up companies, women are poorly represented in these processes. It is necessary for them to get involved in as many business networks as possible, participate in public debates, and join research conducted by non-governmental organizations, universities and research centers, in order to highlight their needs but at the same time be familiar with the opportunities offered to them. For example, universities or local authorities often establish business zones (incubators or accelerators) that provide free space to newly establish small businesses with support in the form of legal, accounting, and consulting, marketing or other services. In addition to the above, entrepreneurs are often provided with mentoring, technical assistance or certain trainings.

3.3. National Legal and Policy Frameworks for Gender Equality

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a robust legal framework to support its gender equality goals, with international human rights standards embedded within its Constitution and national legislation (UN Women, 2022, March). Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified UN (CEDAW) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1980), reinforced by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), committing to take steps towards achieving gender equality.

The **Law on Gender Equality of Bosnia and Herzegovina** (Official Gazette of BiH, Vol. 102/09) addresses key areas such as education, employment, labour and access to resources, equal representation, social protection, healthcare, culture and sports, public life, and media and provides the framework for the gender institutional mechanisms. The Law explicitly promotes and protects gender equality, guaranteeing equal opportunities for all in both public and private domains and prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination on the grounds of gender and sexual orientation. Article 2 of this law guarantees full gender equality across all sectors of society, including education, economy, employment and labour, social welfare, health care, sport, culture, public life, and the media. This is further reinforced by the **Law on Prohibition of Discrimination (Official Gazette of BiH, vol. 59/09 and 66/16)** and that is amended to explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics.

Significant efforts have been made in and in the domain of developing an adequate framework for equal gender opportunities in the labor market and combating discrimination in the workplace. The Labour Law in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Official Gazette of FBiH, Vol. 26/16 and 89/18) introduced the possibility for a father to use parental leave, while the Labour Law in Republika Srpska (Official Gazette of RS, Vol. 1/16 and 66/18.) tends to improve standards of gender equality and protection against discrimination and violence.

The **Gender Action Plan (GAP)** as a strategic framework that outlines specific actions, goals, and policies aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is prepared periodically by the Gender Equality Agency of BiH based on proposals from all state level ministries and gender centers (UNECE, 2022). The plan was first adopted in 2006 (UNECE, 2022). This plan is designed to be the main policy document guiding national gender equality efforts. In more particular the EU Gender Action Plan III – 2021-2025 for Bosnia and Herzegovina represents the overall objective of the EU action for gender equality and women’s empowerment arising from the Priority No. 9 (the European Commission 2019 Opinion on BiH’s application for EU membership): *“Strengthen the protection of the rights of all citizens, notably by ensuring the implementation of the legislation on non-discrimination and on gender equality”*. The plan notifies country-specific priorities addressing the gender pay gap, recognition of unpaid household work and work in agriculture, vulnerable groups’ access to education, health, social services and economic empowerment opportunities, integration women’s economic empowerment into country’s economic policy, overcoming occupational segregation by exploring options in STEM and digitalization as well as green and circular economy etc. The Financial Mechanism for the Implementation of the Gender Action Plan of BiH (**FIGAP Program**) serves as a financial mechanism for its implementation (UNECE, 2022). In addition, BiH has adopted a strategy to implement the Istanbul Convention, and the Republika Srpska has enacted legislation introducing the definition of femicide into its legal framework (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2019; UN Women, 2022).

While these legal and policy commitments are strong, a significant challenge persists in their practical application. This is particularly evident in women’s political representation. Despite a 40% electoral gender quota introduced in 2013, women held only 19.1% of parliamentary seats as of February 2024, the lowest point since 2010 (Equal Future Eurasia, n.d.; UN Women, 2024). This failure of a strong legal mandate to translate into substantive political representation suggests that the problem is not a lack of policy but a failure of implementation. The low representation is a symptom of deeper systemic and cultural barriers that undermine institutional efforts and demonstrate that legislative quotas alone are insufficient to overcome ingrained patriarchal norms.

3.4. Water Sector Management Structure and Reforms

Institutional setup

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Constitution delegates water supply and water management primarily to the entity level (the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska), with the state level having responsibility for international waters and the only authority embodied in the BiH **Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, Sector for water resources, tourism and environmental protection**. The competency in Federation BiH is shared between the entity (**FBIH Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry**) and ten cantons (cantonal line ministries) in opposite to the competency centralized on the entity level in Republika Srpska (**RS Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management**) and Brcko district BiH (**BD BiH Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management**).

Water Management Department in FBIH Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry prepares regulation, strategies and development policies for water management; development documents for integrated water management; measures to improve the state of water in the Federation; granting concessions; resolving requests, ex officio and appeals in the administrative procedure for issuing water management or water acts and decisions on public goods; supervising the work of agencies and the legality of acts adopted by cantons.

Among many tasks RS Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management performs duties that concern exploitation of forests; forestation of degraded and sprout forests, bare mountainous terrains and karsts; complete management of environmental waters; water balance; conducting of protection from harmful effects of waters; setting conditions and issuing of permits for scooping and use of waters; carrying out and organizing of water quality control; taking measures to provide water for the needs of citizens and industry; hydro and land reclamation.

Besides, two institutions implement water managements tasks (management plans, hydrological monitoring, flood protection etc.) in Federation BiH entity, **Sava River Basin Agency** for the Danube/Sava catchment and **Adriatic Sea Watershed Agency** for the Adriatic catchment as well as public Institution Vode Srpske in Republika Srpska entity.

Legislative and policy setup

FBiH Law on Waters of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Official Gazette FBiH, vol. 70/06) regulates the way of water management within the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (water protection, water use, protection against the harmful effects of water and regulation of watercourses and other waters) in order to target reduction in water pollution, achieving a good water condition and preventing water degradation; achieving sustainable water use; ensuring fair access to water; encouraging social and economic development; ecosystem protection; reducing the risk of floods and other negative impacts of water; ensuring public participation in decision-making related to water; preventing and resolving conflicts related to the protection and use of water and fulfilling obligations from international agreements that are binding for BiH.

The core policy documents that govern water supply and water management are **FBiH Environmental Protection Strategy for the period 2022 – 2032**, **FBiH Water Management Strategy for the period 2022 – 2030** and water management plans for the associated water areas (Sava River and the Adriatic Sea for the period 2022 to 2027).

The main legal foundation for water management and water supply in Republika Srpska, embodied in **RS Water Law** (Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska, vol. 50/06, 92/09, 121/12 and 74/17) regulates integrated water management in RS, including protection of waters, use, regulation of watercourses, public water goods, facilities, institutions and financing. Besides, regulation on the procedure of public participation in water management ensures that, when plans or decisions that affect water are made, the public has a role, while regulation on conditions and manner of maintenance of riverbeds, dislocation and extraction of materials from watercourses governs how one can extract materials, keep the riverbeds, to avoid erosion, prevent harmful change in flows, regulation on conditions and manner of leasing water land defines how riverbanks and riverbeds as public water resource can be leased, for what uses and with what constraints, as not to hurt the water regime.

RS Environmental Strategy for the period 2022 to 2032 also regulates water management and aims for better compliance of Republika Srpska regulations with EU *acquis* and international agreements. **RS Strategy on integrated water management for the period 2015 – 2024** aims at establishing integrated management and entirely aligned water regime on the territory of Republika Srpska for both river basins.

Despite the efforts made, the Subcommittee for Transport, Energy, Environment and Regional Development of the European Union made a number of recommendations in 2023¹, *inter alia* encouraging BiH to improve the current regulations (including laws on water) in order to further harmonize them with the *EU acquis* in relation to water, including the issues of municipal wastewater treatment, drinking water and floods, to be done in a coordinated and coordinated manner to ensure the sustainability of investments, such as investments in wastewater treatment plants.

In terms of gender mainstreaming, BiH has a strong legal foundation. The overarching Law on Gender Equality mandates that all statistical data collected by state bodies must be "gender-disaggregated" (Law on Gender Equality, 2003). This requirement applies directly to the water sector, implying that data collected for water management should be disaggregated by gender, which is a fundamental step for developing gender-sensitive policy (Law on Gender Equality, 2003). Some water governance programs have "operational goals of mainstreaming gender perspectives" (WEDC Knowledge, 2014).

¹ The document retrieved from https://www.dei.gov.ba/uploads/documents/teerd-preporuke-6-sastanak-videokonferencija-2442023_1697032453.pdf

This absence of explicit detail at the operational level is a **critical finding** that highlights a key challenge: the issue is not a lack of legal will but a problem of translating high-level commitments into concrete, consistently implemented policies in the technical water sector.

The Policy-Implementation Gap: From Law to Practice

While the water sector policies themselves may be gender-neutral on the surface, their implementation is governed by the overarching **Law on Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2003)**, which provides the strong legal foundation for gender mainstreaming.

TABLE 4 Policy Vs Implementation

Legal Mandate (High-Level Policy)	Implementation Reality (Operational Policy Gap)
Mandate for Gender-Disaggregated Data: The Law on Gender Equality (2003) mandates that all statistical data collected by state bodies must be "gender-disaggregated."	Data Deficiencies: The water sector often fails to collect and use gender-disaggregated data on water access, quality, and time burdens for water collection, leading to gender-blind planning and budgeting (UN Women, 2024).
Mandate for Equal Participation: The Law guarantees equal opportunity in public life, implying women should participate in water governance at all levels.	Marginalization in Decision-Making: Water governance institutions, such as Basin Agencies and local utility boards, remain heavily male-dominated. Gender issues are often seen as "irrelevant or marginal" due to a "heavy focus on engineering" and technical expertise, effectively sidelining women's local knowledge and concerns (WEDC Knowledge, 2014).
National Gender Action Plan (GAP): The GAP (2023-2027) sets objectives for all sectors, including environmental management, to achieve gender equality.	Lack of Sectoral Integration: Water sector strategies and plans frequently fail to explicitly integrate the GAP's goals or budget for gender-specific activities, such as targeted outreach to female water users or training on gender-responsive budgeting for water utility staff.

Unpacking Institutional Culture and Water Sector Management

The problem is rooted in a prevailing **institutional culture** within the water management bodies, such as the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry, and the Water Management Division.

1. **"Engineering Bias" in Water Governance:** The sector's historical focus on large-scale infrastructure and technical engineering solutions (the "heavy focus on engineering") means that social issues like gender equality are often perceived as secondary, "soft," or outside the scope of "real" water management. This technical centric view prevents staff from acknowledging the social dimensions of water access.
2. **Example of Implementation Failure (Asset & Service):**
 - **The Issue:** Women, as primary water managers in the household, disproportionately suffer from poor water service (Water as a Service). The **time poverty** and health burdens associated with inadequate water services can hinder women's productivity and economic participation (UN Women, 2024).
 - **The Policy Gap:** When a Ministry designs a new water supply project, the technical design prioritizes capacity and cost efficiency. Without a gender responsive policy, the project team fails to conduct a time use survey (using the legally mandated disaggregated data) to understand how the current system impacts women's time. Consequently, the new infrastructure may be placed inconveniently or fail to address the specific needs of female water users, thus perpetuating the inequality (UN Women, 2024).
3. **Example of Implementation Failure (Voice & Space):**
 - **The Issue:** Women have minimal representation and influence in local water user associations or municipal utility boards (Water as a Space).
 - **The Policy Gap:** While the Law on Gender Equality requires 40% representation in public bodies, the operational structures of local water bodies often fall below this quota, especially in rural areas. The central water authorities do not have an explicit, mandatory directive in

their operational manuals to track gender representation in these local bodies or to require equal participation in public consultations on water tariffs or infrastructure plans. This ensures that the perspectives of the people most affected by water quality the women and girls are consistently unheard (WEDC Knowledge, 2014).

4. Gender Analysis of the Water Sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Key Findings

A gender analysis of BiH's water sector reveals significant disparities in women's access, control, and participation. These imbalances are deeply rooted in societal norms and economic structures, and when viewed through the "Water as an Asset, Service, and Space" framework, they highlight how women's vital contributions are often undervalued and their potential for leadership is left unrealized.

TABLE 5 Gender Analysis of Water Sector

Framework Pillar	Key Gender Disparity Identified	Supporting Evidence	Implications for Gender Equality
Water as an Asset	Women's economic contributions are undervalued and often confined to the informal sector, limiting their access to formal assets and economic opportunities in the water sector.	Women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid family work and are overrepresented in part-time and unpaid labor (UN Women, 2024). The lack of gender-disaggregated data on women's access to assets (including land) makes their economic contributions largely invisible (UN Women, 2024).	The disproportionate burden of care work directly limits women's ability to accumulate economic assets and achieve financial independence, perpetuating the gender pay gap and dependency.
Water as a Service	Women disproportionately bear the burden of household water management, which, in areas with inadequate services, leads to a time and health burden.	The prevalence of unpaid family work, which women disproportionately perform, is a strong proxy for their burden in household water management (UN Women, 2024). Less than half of the population has access to safely managed drinking water (UN Women, 2022).	The burden of water collection and household management creates "time poverty," restricting women's opportunities for education, formal employment, and community participation, which exacerbates poverty and vulnerability.
Water as a Space	Women are significantly underrepresented in formal decision-making bodies at all levels, particularly within the male-dominated water sector.	Despite a 40% electoral quota, women's parliamentary representation is only 19.1% (Equal Future Eurasia, 2024; UN Women, 2024). Gender issues are often seen as "irrelevant" in the water sector, which has a heavy focus on engineering (WEDC Knowledge, 2014).	The absence of women's voices from water governance leads to "gender-blind" policies that fail to address their specific needs and priorities, limiting their agency and power.

4.1. Water as an Asset: Access, Control, and Economic Opportunities

The country is believed to have high amount of renewable surface and ground freshwater equalling to some 9,500 m³ per person annually, making it among the 20 countries in the world.

Nevertheless, the water supply and sewerage system suffer from highly defragmented management spread over two regional water utilities (in Mostar and Sarajevo), 142 local **water utility companies**² owned by respective self-governing units (municipalities and cities) serving some **58 per cent** of the population with **30 per cent relying on self-provisioning** through local unregistered community systems and **12 per cent not having access** to the drinking water. The discrepancy of infrastructure and water quality between urban areas and rural

² Retrieved from <https://sos.danubis.org/eng/country-notes/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

communities is dramatically high (especially illustrated in poor monitoring for certain contaminants such as heavy metals, pesticides).

The service provision from formal water service providers is suboptimal with poor investment into maintenance of pipelines resulting in leakages equalling to **55 per cent of non-revenue water** and **only 3 per cent population connected to wastewater treatment plant**. Companies operate highly inefficient indicating **average staff productivity equalling to 15.8** (number of employees to 1,000 inhabitants served). These deficiencies are expected to have **strong impact on the affordability of water services**, once tariffs are established on cost recovery principle with the upgrade of the existing infrastructure (especially upon wastewater treatment facilities are in function).

Women's economic contributions to water-related activities in BiH are often unrecognized and undervalued. While women play an important role in household and small-scale farming water management, their labour is frequently confined to the informal economy or performed as unpaid family work. For example, in a 2018 report, women accounted for an overwhelming majority of unpaid family workers, making up **11.3%** of the total female labour force in Republika Srpska and **14.4%** in Brčko District, compared to a negligible percentage for men (Agency for Gender Equality of BiH, 2018). This structural imbalance not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also prevents women from earning a fair wage and having influence over how water resources are managed and distributed (UN Women, 2024). The lack of gender-disaggregated data on women's access to assets, including land and water resources, makes their economic contributions largely invisible in official statistics, further obscuring their role and hindering evidence-based policy (UN Women, 2022). The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work directly limits women's ability to engage in formal, paid employment, and by extension, their capacity to accumulate economic assets. This creates a cycle where their lack of economic power prevents them from influencing the management of water as an economic resource, perpetuating their disadvantage.

4.2. Water as a Service: Time and Health Burden

When water supplies are unreliable, women bear the primary burden. Although specific data on water collection time is not provided, the general finding that women prioritize family roles over employment and constitute the majority of unpaid family workers is a direct proxy for this burden (UN Women, 2024). The World Bank indicates that only **46%** of the population in BiH has access to safely managed drinking water (UN Women, 2022). In areas with inadequate service, women are typically responsible for collecting water, a time-consuming and physically demanding task. This "**time poverty**" directly limits their ability to pursue an education, find formal employment, or participate in community life. The effort spent on water collection also increases their vulnerability to water-related illnesses, as they are often the caregivers for family members who become sick (UN Women, 2024).

4.3. Water as a Space: Voice and Decision Making

Considering the fact that the ownership of registered water service providers is in the domain of local governments, and that unregistered water utilities are managed within communities, it can be very confidently stated that advocating for women's needs is crucial at the local level. **Share of women in municipal/city councils** is traditionally desperate, ranging from 16.2 in 2012 to **22.02 per cent in 2024** with women holding municipal mayor's function in 8 of 142 local administrations (CEC, 2025). If we take into account that the share of women on the candidate lists was around 42 percent, it is clear that male candidates enjoy twice as much voter trust, regardless of the voter's gender. The above strongly indicates the cultural dimension and perception of the role of women in society.

Despite women's vital role in water management at the household and small-scale farming levels, they are largely absent from formal decision-making bodies. While BiH has a strong legal framework for political inclusion, women's parliamentary representation is only **19.1%** (Equal Future Eurasia, 2024; UN Women, 2024). This low political representation at the highest levels of government is a microcosm of the challenges faced by women in all other sectors, including the technical and male-dominated water sector. The provided material explicitly

notes that within the water and sanitation sector, gender issues are often seen as “**irrelevant or marginal**” due to a “**heavy focus on engineering**” (WEDC Knowledge, 2014). This institutional bias, coupled with a lack of high-level support and insufficient resource allocation, creates a significant barrier to women’s meaningful participation (WEDC Knowledge, 2014). The result is the creation of “**gender-blind**” policies that fail to address the specific needs and priorities of women and girls, limiting their agency and power in water governance.

5. Identified Gaps, Underlying Challenges, and Emerging Themes

5.1. Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

The core problem in achieving substantive gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a lack of policy but a failure of implementation. The country has a robust legal framework and strategic action plans, but a combination of factors prevents these commitments from translating into tangible results on the ground. The most powerful of these factors is the

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The most powerful of these factors is the persistence of deeply ingrained **traditional gender roles and cultural factors** that consistently undermine institutional and legislative efforts (UN Women, 2024). This resistance is evident in the outcomes: despite legal quotas, women’s political representation remains low at **19.1%** (Equal Future Eurasia, 2024), and the gender pay gap persists at **22% to 24%** in the public and private sectors, respectively (Borgen Project, 2023).

This failure is further exacerbated by the limited capacity of gender institutional mechanisms to consistently monitor and measure the impact of gender mainstreaming efforts (UN Women, 2024). Additionally, **insufficient resource allocation** and a lack of accountability mechanisms allow for the persistent failure to translate policy goals into tangible outcomes (WEDC Knowledge, 2014). This suggests that future efforts must shift from policy formulation to strengthening institutional capacity, dedicating resources to implementation, and creating better ways to hold stakeholders accountable for results.

5.2. Data Deficiencies and Monitoring Challenges

A major obstacle in BiH’s water sector and broader gender equality efforts is the significant **lack of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data** (UN Women, 2022).

This is not just a minor issue; it is a fundamental barrier that prevents effective policymaking and monitoring (UN Women, 2024). Without data that shows the specific impacts on men and women, it is impossible to understand how water policies affect different genders (UN Women, 2024). This lack of information means that policies often remain “**gender blind**,” failing to address the unique needs of men and women (UN Women, 2024).

It also becomes difficult to monitor progress toward gender equality goals, allowing inequalities to persist unchecked because their specific impacts are invisible. For instance, the data gap is particularly acute concerning unpaid care and domestic work, the gender pay gap, and women’s access to assets (including land), all of which are critical to the water sector’s “Asset” and “Service” pillars (UN Women, 2022).

The Law on Gender Equality (2003) legally mandates the collection of gender-disaggregated data, but the lack of comparable methodologies and its inconsistent application remain a challenge (Law on Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2003; UN Women, 2024). Collecting and analysing this information is a critical first step toward creating effective and equitable policies.

5.3. Intersectional Vulnerabilities and Their Impact

The impacts of poor water management in BiH are not felt equally; they are most severe for vulnerable groups due to a concept known as **intersectionality** (UN Women, 2024). This means that the impact of poor water management in BiH is not felt equally; it is most severe for vulnerable groups due to a concept known as **intersectionality** (UN Women, 2024). This means that multiple disadvantages, such as gender, poverty, and ethnicity, combine to create unique and compounded challenges.

The women living in **remote and rural areas**, women with disabilities, and women from marginalized ethnic groups such as **Roma** continue to face discrimination (UN Women, 2024). A single policy aimed at improving water access may not address the unique challenges faced by a poor, rural woman from a minority group.

The increased vulnerability to pollution and environmental disasters faced by subgroups of the population, particularly women, is tied to social norms and local customs (UNECE, 2022).

TABLE 6 Vulnerability & Its Impact

Vulnerability Dimension	Impact on Water Access/Management	Statistics/Evidence
Gender & Rurality/Poverty	Rural women spend more time and effort securing water, exacerbating "time poverty" and limiting economic opportunity.	Only 46% of the population in BiH has access to safely managed drinking water (UN Women, 2022), with the gap being most severe in rural and marginalized communities.
Gender & Ethnicity (Roma)	Roma women face compounded discrimination in accessing basic public services, including water and sanitation infrastructure, due to both gender and ethnic marginalization.	A 2020 World Bank study highlighted that a significant portion of Roma settlements in BiH lack access to the basic public water network and/or sewage systems (World Bank, 2020).
Gender & Environmental Disaster	Traditional gender roles place women at greater risk during and after floods or environmental pollution, as they are often responsible for securing the home and caring for the sick.	The vulnerability of women to pollution and environmental disasters is explicitly tied to social norms and local customs, increasing their health and safety burdens during crises (UNECE, 2022).

To truly ensure that **"no one is left behind,"** water management strategies must use an **intersectional lens**, identifying and targeting the most at-risk populations specifically and designing interventions that address their combined forms of disadvantage.

5.4. Broader Socio-Economic and Environmental Linkages

Water issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not isolated; they are deeply intertwined with larger societal and environmental challenges.

The provided material notes the **gendered vulnerability to climate change**, where social norms make women more susceptible to the impacts of environmental disasters (UNECE, 2022). For example, as primary caregivers and managers of household resources, women are placed at greater risk during and after floods or water contamination events as they are responsible for securing the home and caring for sick family members.

Furthermore, water stress is linked to broader socio-economic issues. The fact that only **46%** of the population in BiH has access to safely managed drinking water (UN Women, 2022) translates directly into a national productivity problem. The resulting **time poverty** and health burdens associated with inadequate water services directly hinder women's productivity and their capacity to contribute to the economy (UN Women, 2024). This emphasizes a critical point: poor water management is not just a utility problem; it is an economic and social equity problem.

This reality stresses that gender-responsive water management cannot be an isolated effort. It requires a **holistic, integrated approach** that links water policies with strategies in:

- **Environmental Protection:** To mitigate the gendered risks of climate change and pollution.
- **Economic Development:** To unlock women's productivity by alleviating time burdens.
- **Social Welfare:** To ensure equitable access to safely managed water for all vulnerable groups, particularly those facing intersectional disadvantages (e.g., rural Roma women).

This integrated approach is essential to achieve sustainable and fair outcomes for all citizens.

6. Conclusion and Strategic Insights for Future Interventions

Bosnia and Herzegovina's pursuit of gender equality is defined by a critical **policy-to-practice gap** (UN Women, 2024). The country possesses a robust legal and institutional framework, including the **Law on Gender Equality (2003)** and a national **Gender Action Plan**, but these commitments are consistently undermined by implementation failures.

The central challenge is the persistence of deeply ingrained **traditional gender roles** which perpetuate women's economic disadvantage and exclude them from decision-making. This failure is quantifiable: women hold only **19.1%** of parliamentary seats (Equal Future Eurasia, 2024) and bear the majority of the burden of unpaid care work. Within the water sector, this gap is exacerbated by three factors: a **pervasive lack of gender-disaggregated data, insufficient resourcing** for gender mainstreaming efforts, and a prevailing **institutional "engineering bias"** that renders gender issues "irrelevant or marginal" (WEDC Knowledge, 2014).

Ultimately, the core problem is a failure to translate high-level legal mandates into concrete, operational policies within the technical sectors. Addressing this requires a strategic shift from policy formulation to **strengthening institutional capacity, enforcing accountability, and actively dismantling the cultural and technical barriers** to genuine gender-responsive governance.

Based on the systemic gaps identified, future interventions in the water sector must adopt an integrated, results-oriented approach focused on implementation and accountability.

1. **Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Accountability:** Mandate and resource the systematic application of **Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB)** across all federal and entity-level water management bodies.
2. **Mandate Systematic Data Collection and Use:** Enforce the legal mandate for **gender-disaggregated data** (Law on Gender Equality, 2003) across the entire water value chain, including time-use surveys related to water collection, participation rates in local water bodies, and women's access to water-related assets.
3. **Enhance Women's Voice and Participation (Water as a Space):** Create and formally resource platforms to ensure women's active and meaningful participation in water decision-making processes, particularly at local and river basin levels. This involves fostering safe spaces for discussion and ensuring their voices are genuinely integrated into policy design and implementation.
4. **Alleviate Time Poverty Through Targeted Infrastructure:** Prioritize investments in water infrastructure development and maintenance in rural and vulnerable areas to alleviate women's disproportionate time burden associated with water collection and improve their health and productivity.
5. **Foster Cross-Sectoral Integration with an Intersectional Lens:** Integrate gender-responsive water management strategies with broader national and local development plans for rural development, public health, and climate resilience, explicitly using an **intersectional lens** to target the compounded disadvantages faced by vulnerable subgroups (e.g., Roma women who lack access to public water/sewage systems) (World Bank, 2020).

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