WATER FIRST

Educate, Empower and Emulate Women in Water

Women in Water

Water security remains one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. It lies at the core of the nexus of agricultural, energy, climate, economic and geopolitical challenges. In sub-Saharan Africa, women bear 71% of the water collection burden, produce 90% of all food, and comprise 70% of the agricultural workforce. Women are involved in water-related activities such as water conservation, water storage, domestic cleaning, crop production in both irrigated and non-irrigated agriculture, and preparation of food. Women dominate subsistence rain-fed agriculture, which puts them more at risk of a changing and variable climate. Despite these responsibilities and contributions, women have restricted access to the resources needed to secure and manage scarce water such as land, agricultural inputs, finance and credit.

While African women are at the forefront of the daily struggle for water security, few are in key leadership positions in the water resources area. This lack of representation by women in decision-making roles removes their vital contribution to water resource policy-making and management, and further exacerbates the existing disconnection between policy and implementation. African women water scientists and engineers can provide fresh, relevant perspectives and solutions to the looming water security crises faced by their countries through their dual scientific expertise in water issues and profound understanding of the challenges facing both urban and rural populations.

The Partnership Opportunities for Women in Water Engineering and Research (POWWER) program founded in 2014 is working to establish a network of African women practitioners whose expertise and experience can be tapped at multiple levels to address water security challenges facing the continent.

2016 POWWER Workshop

Following the inaugural POWWER workshop in 2015 in Windhoek, Namibia, the 2016 POWWER was held in Kigali, Rwanda on June 11-12. The workshop convened African women scientists and engineers from 11 countries to discuss the key water issues in their regions of Africa and develop a set of recommendations for action. All agreed that it is crucial that women at all levels, from the highest level of government to the communities and villages, be mobilized to play a more active role in making tangible gains in water security issues. A set of recommendations was developed around the themes of water quality, water storage, ecosystems, sanitation, water policy and implementation, and water sustainability.

Action Items

Efforts beyond the workshop will be focused in three areas:

1. Educate public officials and policy makers

Water security directly impacts development and economic growth of all nations. However, many African countries have not yet prioritized water in their national agenda. There is a need to raise the awareness of public officials and policy makers on the central role played by water for green development and economic growth. In addition, national leaders must recognize that the talents, energy and expertise of both men and women are needed to address the complex challenges of water security. There is also a need for more trained professionals working in the water sector. Gender-neutral approaches to recruitment and training for technical, social, service and legal careers in water is necessary for all qualified citizens to participate and contribute equitably to their country's water security challenges.

2. ***Empower women and girls to participate and lead***

Women and girls are charged with securing domestic water for millions of people daily, yet few women participate or lead in the water sector. More women should be empowered to pursue careers and career success in the water sector, beginning with the encouragement of girls to enter water-related science and technology fields. Laws and policies must also be implemented to ensure that qualified women are appointed and promoted to leadership positions in the water sector.

Securing water disproportionately disadvantages young girls who often have to drop out of school to assist with fetching water and other domestic chores. The education of these young girls must be prioritized. In addition, young girls should be trained for water sector careers, especially those in science and technology, and mentored to pursue leadership positions. Women should be economically, legally and politically empowered to pursue and be successful in wide range of leadership roles in the water sector e.g., as water scientists, senior government officials, water resources managers, farmers and irrigators. This effort requires creation of laws, policies and social awareness programs and lead to an increase in women's access to and control over water, land, and credit and water services. It would facilitate leveraging of water infrastructure for gender equality, increased productivity of women farmers, and provision of skills training for women in water-related fields.

3. *Emulate best practices and role models*

Women should be actively recruited and promoted for leadership positions. These professional women would provide new, much-needed perspectives in regional and national water security dialogues, and water policy design and implementation. Further, the next generation of women leaders in water needs access to successful practitioners and professional networks today. Both men and women in leadership and professional positions should be tapped to serve as mentors, role models and champions to ensure the retention and success of young women in water-related careers, particularly those in the physical sciences and engineering.

This program is organized through the COACh Organization (http://coach.uoregon.edu) at the University of Oregon. More information about the workshop can be found at: http://coach.uoregon.edu/coach-international/rwanda/ and the COACh facebook page.