

The OSCE-led Women in Water Management Network in Central Asia and Afghanistan

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Across Central Asia and Afghanistan, water remains one of the clearest examples of how countries are fundamentally interconnected. Rivers, lakes, and aquifers cross borders regardless of politics, linking communities, economies, food systems, and energy production throughout the region. In this context, strengthening cooperation is not simply a technical necessity, but a long-term investment in regional stability, resilience, and sustainable development.

The OSCE-led Women in Water Management Network in Central Asia and Afghanistan, and more recently the Women in Water Diplomacy Network in the South Caucasus, was launched in 2021 with the aim of strengthening regional cooperation through greater inclusivity, professional exchange, and capacity development. Bringing together women

professionals from government institutions, academia, basin organizations, civil society, and international organizations, the Network has gradually evolved into an important platform for dialogue and peer support across a politically and geographically diverse region.

At its core, the Network is built on a simple but important idea: cooperation is strengthened when more people are meaningfully included in shaping solutions. While women already play essential roles across the water sector, they often remain underrepresented in senior decision-making positions, technical leadership roles, negotiations, and regional cooperation processes. Structural barriers, unequal access to professional opportunities, and limited representation in traditionally male-dominated institutions continue to affect participation in many parts of the region.

The Network helps address some of these challenges by creating space for professional exchange, mentorship, training, and regional dialogue. It strengthens visibility and connections among women working in water management while helping ensure that regional cooperation processes benefit from a broader range of expertise, perspectives, and experience. In regions where political tensions can sometimes limit formal cooperation, these professional networks become especially important. They help sustain communication, strengthen institutional knowledge, and create informal channels for continued dialogue.

One of the most valuable aspects of the Network has been its focus on capacity development as a mechanism for bringing both people and countries together. Trainings, workshops, mentoring activities, and regional exchanges allow participants to share practical experiences while building trust and long-term professional relationships across borders.

The Network has also demonstrated how regional cooperation initiatives can provide continuity during periods of uncertainty and disruption. Following the political changes in Afghanistan in 2021, many Afghan water professionals faced growing isolation from regional and international engagement. While maintaining consistent participation has become increasingly difficult, the Network nevertheless provided an important channel for some professionals to remain connected to regional discussions, trainings, and peer exchanges during a period of significant uncertainty.

The Network's activities increasingly reflect the growing complexity of water challenges facing the region. Climate change, drought, floods, glacier retreat, energy pressures, and rising water demand all require stronger cooperation and more adaptive governance approaches. Addressing these challenges cannot rely only on infrastructure or technical

planning. It also requires trust, communication, and the ability of institutions and professionals to work together across borders and sectors.

Like many regional initiatives, challenges remain. Sustaining long-term engagement requires continued financial support, institutional commitment, and the ability to adapt to evolving geopolitical realities. Yet the experience of the Network demonstrates that cooperation is not built only through high-level agreements. It is also built through human relationships, professional solidarity, and regular opportunities for people to learn and work together.

In a region where shared water resources will continue to shape the future of cooperation and stability, networks like this will be part of the solution.

Bio

Kerry Schneider is an independent advisor on transboundary water cooperation and international water diplomacy with a strong focus on Central Asia. Kerry has been supporting the Women in Water Management Network in Central Asia and Afghanistan since its launch in 2021, including through regional dialogue processes, capacity development activities, and engagement linked to international water cooperation initiatives.