



**FEMMES ET VILLES DURABLES**  
Améliorer l'accès à l'eau et la gestion des ressources

**Cities Alliance**  
Cities Without Slums

Hosted by  
**UNOPS**

**MINISTÈRE  
DE L'EUROPE  
ET DES AFFAIRES  
ÉTRANGÈRES**  
Liberté  
Égalité  
Fraternité

# EXPANDING INCLUSIVE, GENDER-SENSITIVE WATER GOVERNANCE IN MENA

## A summary of stakeholder engagement workshops in Figuig, Kairouan and Sebkh

Cities around the world are on the brink of a global water crisis. Fast-growing urban populations are putting increasing pressure on water resources and local authorities' capacity to manage them. At the same time, the impacts of climate change, such as water scarcity, flooding, and water pollution, add to resilience challenges. Women are disproportionately impacted by water-related climate risks, exacerbating gender inequality in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.



## TO BE SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE, CITIES NEED SOLUTIONS TO MANAGING WATER THAT ENGAGE WOMEN.

Although women are community building agents, primary water bearers, and family caregivers in households, they face social, economic, and cultural factors that limit their ability to act on water management. Traditional roles and practices often restrict women to the home space, with decision making seen as the purview of men. Overall, there are few women in public institutions and water or utility authorities, especially in decision making or leadership roles.

Women and girls bear the brunt of water stress and scarcity due to societal roles, especially the increasing care responsibilities that fall on them. For instance, women are generally responsible for getting water for the household. When water becomes less available, the journey to fetch it can become longer, more time-consuming,

and sometimes even increases the risk of predatory behaviors and violence, including Gender-based Violence.

Women and girls also have specific water-related needs, including menstrual hygiene that requires clean water and accessible, gender-responsive infrastructure. This situation is even more acute for the many female migrants, internally displaced women, and refugees in the MENA region.

When women are involved in water management and climate adaptation governance as stakeholders, decision-makers, and leaders, they can shape the agenda, establish priorities, and craft objectives that can positively influence communities, reduce gender inequality, and make cities more climate resilient.

### THE MENA REGION IS THE MOST WATER-SCARCE ON EARTH.



**IT HAS ONLY ABOUT 1% OF  
THE PLANET'S FRESHWATER** even though it covers around 9.5% of the world's land and is home to roughly 5.4% of the global population.

In developing economies, **WOMEN ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR FETCHING WATER IN 7 OUT OF 10 HOUSEHOLDS** that lack access to it on-site.



**ONLY 17%  
CENT OF THOSE  
WORKING IN  
WATER AND  
HYGIENE ARE  
WOMEN.**

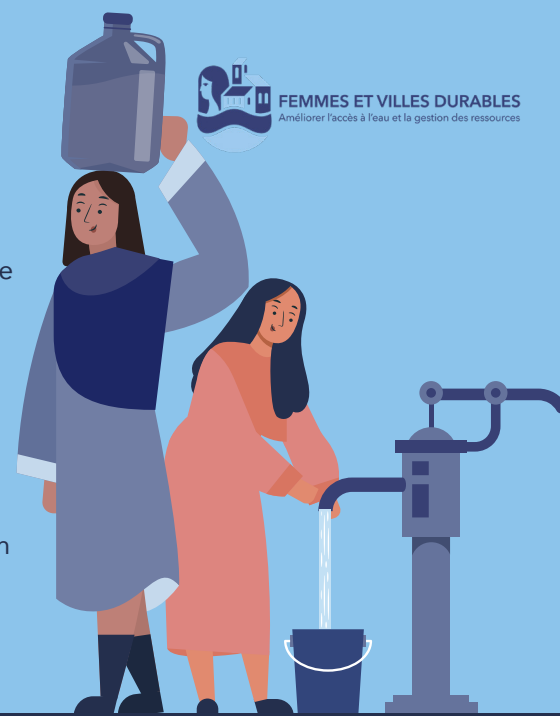
# THE WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE CITIES INITIATIVE



FEMMES ET VILLES DURABLES  
Améliorer l'accès à l'eau et la gestion des ressources

The Cities Alliance Women and Sustainable Cities (“Femmes et Villes Durables”) initiative is responding to this need by transforming water and climate governance across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Implemented in collaboration with municipalities and local civil society, the initiative is funded by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

The two-year participatory initiative aims to provide insights into the challenges faced by urban women in managing water and guidance on achieving a more inclusive, gender-sensitive approach to drought and water management. It also seeks to enhance the resilience of women, communities, and local governments in the face of climate change-induced risks, and increase the role of women as leaders in climate adaptation action.



THE INITIATIVE FEATURES PILOT PROGRAMMES IN THREE CITIES, EACH TAILORED TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT:

## KAIROUAN, TUNISIA

with a rich cultural heritage that includes traditional water management techniques.



## FIGUIG, MOROCCO

Figuig, an oasis town in eastern Morocco renowned for its ingenious water distribution and management system, facing challenges with a fragile ecosystem and degrading groundwater levels.

## SEBKHA, MAURITANIA

Sebkha, Mauritania, a municipality characterized by large numbers of poor families with little connection to the city water network and a high percentage of women-headed households.



# FEMMES ET VILLES DURABLES: A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The initiative consists of various components to ensure a participatory approach:

Data collection on gender-sensitive water management using Cities Alliance's Her4Water tool and citizen surveys to provide a needs assessment for each city.



Participatory workshops involving all stakeholders to engage women in the process and identify key themes.

Comprehensive assessments that outline women's specific needs, potential risks, skills, and knowledge in water management for each city.



Pilot projects identified, co-designed, and implemented in urban areas to improve women's access to water and enhance sustainable water management.

Capacity building on gender-sensitive water management for municipal staff and training sessions on sustainable water use and management for women.



Municipal exchanges to share learning and promote gender-responsive urban water governance and climate adaptation across the region.



## APPLYING THE HER4WATER TOOL

Cities Alliance created the Her4Water tool to empower women and girls to actively contribute to water management and to promote their participation and leadership in climate adaptation initiatives by harnessing their knowledge and capacities.

It provides a framework for collecting qualitative and quantitative data to assess the vulnerability of women and girls to water scarcity, and their level of engagement, participation, and leadership in the management and governance of water resources.

Her4Water is easily applicable in field environments, including marginalised local communities. It can be used in urban and peri-urban areas, spanning different contexts from cities to neighbourhoods and communities. The Women and Sustainable Cities initiative is the first application of the Her4Water tool.

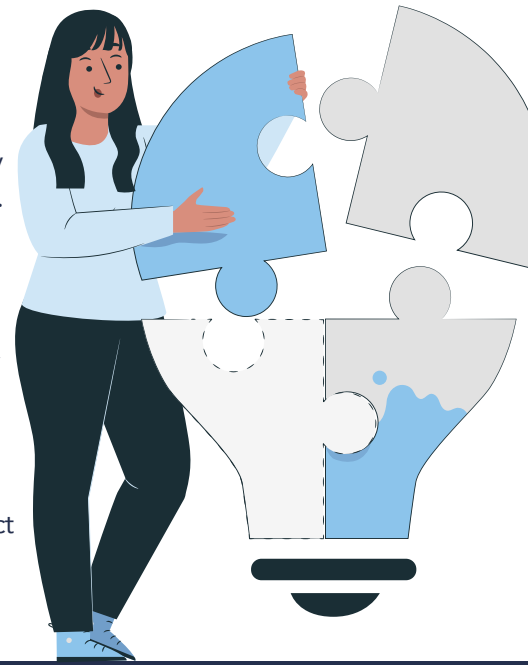


# IDENTIFYING THEMES AND OPPORTUNITIES: KEY FINDINGS

As part of the initiative, **each city hosts a participatory stakeholder** workshop to identify priority themes related to water management, challenges, and opportunities for solutions. Participants include representatives of municipalities and utilities, local non-governmental and women-led associations, and regional and national authorities working in the field.

The data resulting from these workshops is **complemented by participatory, citizen-focused activities, such as citizen surveys, women workshops, and community mapping actions.** On the base of the resulting data, project partners then work together to co-design and implement pilot activities that respond to the identified challenges.

Some of the identified opportunities are beyond the scope of this project, such as overhauling an entire water system or constructing a wastewater plant. However, the project builds capacity in data collection and participatory mechanisms that help the cities become better equipped to engage with local authorities on the larger-scale solutions.



## THE WORKSHOPS IN THE THREE CITIES PRODUCED THE FOLLOWING KEY FINDINGS:



### ACCESS TO WATER AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

CITY	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
<b>FIGUIG</b>	While access to drinking water is fairly good, climate change has exacerbated water scarcity and the decline of natural underground springs. These shortages limit availability, reduce supply hours, and decrease water quality, disproportionately affecting women and their ability to perform household tasks.	Upgrade existing infrastructure by replacing septic tanks with sewage lines, building a wastewater plant, digging additional boreholes, or rehabilitating the drinking water network to ensure a sustainable and resilient water supply system.
<b>KAIROUAN</b>	Water resources are threatened by overexploitation, pollution, and waste.	Explore innovative techniques for rainwater harvesting and wastewater treatment to preserve and expand better-quality water resources.
<b>SEBKHA</b>	Many households lack the financial means to have running water installed in their homes, lack access to drinking water, and frequently suffer long-term water cuts. The majority of neighborhoods are not on the city water line, and residents often have limited choice and understanding of how to obtain access to water service.	Expand the distribution networks for greater access, construct more standpipes with better management, and increase awareness of how to connect to the water line to improve access.

#### CLIMATE CHANGE AND DRAINAGE IN SEBKHA

The settlement is located in a low-lying area of Nouakchott, and water never drains completely. During the rainy season, stagnant water puts residents at risk of disease from water-borne bacteria and prevents women from accessing standpipes. It also reduces mobility in the community and makes it more difficult for street vendors, many of them women, to earn a living.

Opportunities include a viable sanitation system to improve drainage; raising awareness of hygiene, wastewater, and waste management; working with local authorities to strengthen flood management; and creating water delivery plans for landlocked areas.





## EMPOWERING WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISION MAKING

CITY	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
<b>FIGUIG</b>	Men have traditionally inherited land and water rights and assumed responsibility for (irrigation) water management. As a result, while women have the right to use water for agriculture and community laundry activities, their participation in decision making related to the management of water stemming from natural springs is low.	Sensitise women, decision makers and the population to women's participation in water management, set up women-governed water councils, rethink norms and traditional practices to encourage women's participation in decision making, and address inheritance issues to preserve women's rights.
<b>KAIROUAN</b>	Women are largely absent from decision making in water management due to political instability. There is no clearly defined strategy for access to quality water, specifically for women.	Promote women's skills in water management and include women in local development plans.
<b>SEBKHA</b>	Women's participation in decision making in water management is low, even though many households are headed by women, who are responsible for the family's water needs and the first to be affected by water issues. Women in Sebkha have expressed a desire to be more involved in decision making.	Involve women more in the management of the settlement's standpipes, which are typically managed by men, to increase women's participation in water management. Adopt a community-based social policy to help people connect to the water network that targets women.



## RETHINKING INNOVATIVE WATER MANAGEMENT AND ACTOR COORDINATION

CITY	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
<b>FIGUIG</b>	Conflicting interests of a multitude of actors. Without a collective sanitation network, septic tanks are used for wastewater disposal, which is costly and impacts water hygiene.	Facilitate coordination among water associations, authority and water users. Improve the sewage network or build a wastewater treatment plant to make water cleaner and more affordable. Provide capacity building and support strategic planning to improve drinking water quality.
<b>KAIROUAN</b>	Traditional water management systems have been neglected. Water governance practices are characterized by centralised resources and lack of transparency.	Adopt new technologies to improve sustainable water management, revive traditional water conservation techniques and bottom-up approaches to improve governance.
<b>SEBKHA</b>	Overpopulation has exacerbated existing water shortages, and lacking coordination among the many actors in the sector prevents sustainable water management. Dilapidated networks and transportation via poorly maintained water tanks and standpipes result in unsafe water and significant waste.	Advocate and coordinate with public authorities to provide a more accurate picture of water demand and build the capacity of local government and beneficiaries to address water issues to improve efficiency. Raise awareness of water hygiene and facilitate more direct access to the water supply to improve quality and reduce waste water.



*The oasis of Figuig relies on its water resources and the knowledge of how to harness these resources sustainably. Understanding how to improve water management in the context of scarcity is key to keeping the oasis alive.*

— Representative of the commune of Figuig





## TOWARDS WATER AS AN INTEGRAL ELEMENT OF PUBLIC SPACE

CITY	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
<b>FIGUIG</b>	Most public spaces are not designed to address water and climate risks or the socio-economic needs of women. Water scarcity is directly impacting women's use of public space, such as the lack of public toilets and drinking water access points.	Develop public spaces such as playgrounds and gardens in the city centre equipped with facilities (toilets, fountains) to meet women's needs. Treat wastewater to irrigate green spaces.
<b>KAIROUAN</b>	Public spaces are often unattractive, difficult to access, and without facilities such as parking, pedestrian crossings, and signage. There are few community and leisure facilities in working-class neighbourhoods.	Design inclusive spaces that are safe and accessible to women and provide easier access to the historic Aghlabid water basins. Reintegrate water management into public space design to showcase water resources and attract tourists.
<b>SEBKHA</b>	Water fountains and the surrounding public spaces are often unhygienic and poorly maintained, making it difficult for women to have safe and healthy access to water at points of sale.	Design public spaces to be responsive to the needs of women, which can also provide economic opportunities.



## REVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL WATER CONSERVATION TECHNIQUES AND HERITAGE

CITY	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
<b>FIGUIG</b>	Communal wash houses traditionally served as a gathering place for women to bathe and do their household laundry, but many have closed due to lack of maintenance or increased risk of irrigation water pollution.	Rehabilitate public washing sites to give women regular access to water for bathing, laundry, and social interaction and raise awareness of using non-chemical soaps to improve the quality of irrigation water.
<b>KAIROUAN</b>	Kairouan has a rich cultural heritage with traditional water conservation systems (foskia and majel) that have been neglected and fallen into disrepair.	Invest in and restore heritage sites to enhance sustainable water management and attract tourism, guided by women's insights. If full restoration is not possible, incremental improvements can make historical areas more women friendly.



*We need to promote water resilience policies based on nature-based solutions that also address gender inequalities.*

— Expert during workshop in Kairouan



# INITIAL RESULTS

While still in the early stages of implementation in the three cities, the project is already having an impact:



Civil society in targeted cities are learning how to use participatory mechanisms, such as surveys, data collection tools, and workshops to provide a forum for discussion.



Women and local stakeholders are being included in discussions of water issues and empowered to share their needs and become more involved in water management.



Workshop discussions are highlighting the cross-cutting nature of water management and governance.



Communities are obtaining data on water and women's needs that they can use to leverage action from the local government.



Women have a forum to discuss creating more gender-friendly public spaces in an environment of water scarcity.



Pilot projects and solutions to identified challenges are discussed and co-designed in an inclusive manner. For example, Kairouan has chosen to rehabilitate a public space near the Medina and establish a cistern (*maje*l).



“

*The women of Sebkhah are responsible for water, the source of life. Their contribution is important. Femmes et Villes Durables is a project that came at the right time.*

— Female representative of civil society in Sebkhah





The brochure combines key results of three stakeholder workshops organized in fall 2023 as part of the project Femmes et Villes Durables in the three project cities. The project is funded by The Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France. Cities Alliance thanks CIETAM Consulting (Mauritania) and IRRI SIG (Morocco) for their support in data collection and analysis.

**AUTHOR AND TECHNICAL COORDINATION:** Juliet Bunch, Leonie Grob

First published in January 2024.

This material has been financed by the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, MEAE. Responsibility for the content rests entirely with the creator. MEAE does not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.

 [CitiesAlliance](#)

 [cities-alliance](#)

 [citiesalliance.org](#)

 [info@citiesalliance.org](mailto:info@citiesalliance.org)