



## **Event: Elevating Women’s Leadership for Effective Transboundary Water Cooperation**

*July 5, 2023 | By Ashley Dawn Anderson, UCLA Law ‘24, Environmental Law Institute Summer Law Clerk supporting the Women in Water Diplomacy Network*

Last year, the United Nations established June 24 as the [International Day for Women in Diplomacy](#). In celebration of the second annual International Day for Women in Diplomacy, the [U.S. Institute of Peace](#), the [Women in Water Diplomacy Network](#), the [Environmental Law Institute](#), and the [Stockholm International Water Institute](#) co-convened an event, [Elevating Women’s Leadership for Effective Transboundary Water Cooperation](#), at the U.S. Institute of Peace on June 20, 2023.

The event was attended by members of the diplomatic community including officials from the Angola, Lesotho, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Zambia Embassies. The audience also included representatives from non-governmental organizations (such as [World Wildlife Fund](#) and [Conservation International](#)), development partners (United States, Netherlands, among others), international organizations (UN agencies, [Organization of American States](#), [International Joint Commission](#), [World Bank](#), and [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#)), U.S. federal agencies ([Department of the Interior](#), [Environmental Protection Agency](#), and [Department of](#)

[State](#)), and academics (American University, George Mason, Georgetown, etc). Over 300 people attended the event virtually. A recording of the event can be found on ELI's YouTube [here](#).

**Kayly Ober**, Senior Program Officer, Climate, Environment and Conflict, U.S. Institute of Peace, opened the event. Kayly began by acknowledging that the event took place on the traditional homelands of the Nacotchtank and Piscataway People before introducing the work of the USIP, including its [Climate, Environment, and Conflict Program](#). Kayly encouraged the audience to read a recent Peaceworks publication: [Displaced to Cities: Conflict, Climate Change, and Rural-to-Urban Migration](#).

**Henk W.J. Ovink**, Special Envoy for International Water Affairs, Kingdom of the Netherlands, provided a well-received keynote address reflecting on how increasing women's involvement improves global water diplomacy. After dedicating his address to his mother, Henk acknowledged how women bear the disproportionate impact of water issues, yet are mostly excluded from water governance. Data shows that when freshwater is available, women outperform men in their communities. Henk also shared his takeaways from the UN 2023 Water Conference, which was co-hosted by The Netherlands and Tajikistan. (Read about the Women in Water Diplomacy Network Engagements at the UN 2023 Water Conference in the [Women in Water Diplomacy Network After Action Report](#).) Henk noted how, unlike climate or biodiversity, there is no agreement on water, so there is nothing holding nations accountable to water. Rather, UN water diplomacy relies on voluntary commitments. Henk said, "If there is no follow-up process, if there is no agreement in alignment...water is left alone in a very vulnerable place." Henk encouraged nations to create comprehensive water plans, elevating the United States' [White House Action Plan on Global Water Security](#) as a good example of such approaches. Henk also addressed key issues around water governance: how water is often free, connected to all sectors, and so complex that we often do not know how to organize ourselves around it. How the resource is unprotected, unaccounted, and undervalued, while the demand for water is increasing. Thus, solutions cannot be single-focused; they must be comprehensive and inclusive. Supporting improved gender equality in water leadership positions will increase sustainable, equitable, and inclusive solutions. In closing, Henk emphasized that, since water is connected to everything, diplomacy informed through a water lens will lead to more inclusive and holistic outcomes.

Following the keynote address, **Elizabeth A. Koch**, Senior Manager for International Programs, Environmental Law Institute and Process Support Lead for Women in Water Diplomacy Network shared [the herstory](#) of the Women in Water Diplomacy Network - outlining the Network's approach and achievements since its initial launch in the Nile Basin in 2017. She then introduced the high-level panelists including: **Dr. Zodwa Dlamini**, Former Chief Delegate and Permanent Representative for South Africa, Lesotho Highlands Water Commission; **Foman Forough**, Former Director General of the Kabul River Basin, Afghanistan; **Assistant Secretary Tanya Trujillo**, Department of Interior, United States; **Deputy Assistant Secretary Dr. Annalise**

**Blum**, Department of Interior, United States; and **Dr. Aubrey Paris**, Senior Advisor, Gender, Climate Change, and Innovation, Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues, Department of State, United States.

The panel discussion began with **Dr. Zodwa Dlamini** providing framing for the concept of water diplomacy. Zodwa noted that diplomacy is a collaborative process that must be inclusive of women, youth, and indigenous peoples. She said that going forward we need more formal and informal engagement, including events like this, in order to improve inclusivity at the national, regional, and village levels. Later, Zodwa reflected on the beginning of the Network. Specifically, Zodwa said that the Women in Water Diplomacy Network empowers women to step into leadership roles with their variety of experiences.

The conversation then turned to the interdisciplinary nature of water diplomacy. **Assistant Secretary Tanya Trujillo** noted that science must be the basis of diplomacy, and **Deputy Assistant Secretary Dr. Annalise Blum** emphasized that all parties are better off when data is shared, especially when data is shared with vulnerable communities, because transparent and accessible data creates a common understanding that diplomats can work from. Annalise noted that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's [Climate Change Adaptation Strategy](#) addresses data in managing water sources in light of climate change.

**Dr. Aubrey Paris** went on to explain that there must be a two-way street of communication between policymakers and scientists. Policy must be informed by the best available data, but policymakers must also inform scientists of the data they need to make complete decisions. For example, the data lacks the lived experiences of women and girls in highly climate-affected regions. Aubrey noted three U.S. strategies that together address the nexus between gender equality and climate change: (1) [National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#); (2) [United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally 2022](#); and (3) [United States Strategy on Global Women's Economic Security](#). Similarly, Annalise noted [White House](#) and [Department of the Interior](#) initiatives in the U.S. that will elevate the voices of indigenous women and girls in [national and regional climate science](#).

**Foman Forough** shared her experience as a senior negotiator in Kabul River Basin in Afghanistan. Because of increasing droughts, transboundary water tensions have increased in recent years. Her work was especially challenging because of traditional Afghan society's disregard for women's leadership and the rise of the Taliban which undid the progress Foman and her colleagues had fought for. As a political refugee in Canada, Foman is now leveraging her experience to support exciting Canadian water initiatives at South Nation Conservation Authority, such as preparing Flood Hazard Identification Map for watershed planning.

The final comments demonstrated that the future of water diplomacy is bright, as leaders force inclusion in water diplomacy to elevate women, youth, and indigenous voices. Tanya had the final comment and reminded the audience of the importance of water—that it unites us and is able to bring people, especially women, together. Kayly Ober closed the event inviting participants to join a following networking reception and encouraging all to stay tuned for the development of the North American Chapter of the Women in Water Diplomacy Network.

