



Group photo of Congress participants outside of the Club Himalaya

Charting a Course for Collaboration & Collective Action

COMMUNIQUÉ, MARCH 2019

From March 6-10 in Nagarkot, Nepal, International Rivers and its partners convened the inaugural Women and Rivers Congress. The event brought together close to 100 women from more than 30 countries to celebrate the fundamental role women play in defending and stewarding freshwater resources, as well as to spur collective action to challenge the deep-rooted, gender inequities that women face in safeguarding rivers and river ecosystems.



“The Congress is a long overdue acknowledgement of the mighty efforts by women across the world to provide a better life for all, and as a part of that, how to steward and use rivers wisely.”

- AUSTRALIAN DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

Origins

Little more than one percent of all freshwater is the surface water necessary for human life and the viability of the world's ecosystems. And these freshwater resources around the world are under threat. In our era of climate instability and increasingly severe natural and man-made environmental disasters, sustainable development and conservation of water resources will require the active participation of all those who use and depend on water — all of us.

While women perform many critical roles in providing, managing and safeguarding water resources, their contributions are too often invisible. Further, women's involvement in higher level decision-making over water resources is limited, with processes and institutions dominated by men. Solving today's most pressing water issues depends on not just the participation, but the leadership, experience, and guidance of women.

Objectives

- Provide a platform for celebration and recognition of women leaders.
- Share knowledge through first-hand accounts of women-led river protection efforts.
- Provide opportunity for initiating collaboration and joint strategies with fellow women river defenders and stewards.
- Bridge gaps across sectors, institutions, and between sections of society through interactive workshop sessions.
- Provide a forum and process to draw out a state of knowledge on women and rivers.
- Produce a declaration statement to inform future action around river and freshwater governance.
- Co-create a vision for the future of women-led work that contributes to UN Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 6.

A plenary session of the Congress



Participants

Congress organizers invited women leaders from a range of ages, diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and geographies, based on their substantive and varied contributions to freshwater protection and gender equity. They:

- Hailed from five continents
- Included academics, artists, community activists, filmmakers, funders, indigenous women, lawyers, members of women's movements, NGO staff, and social change networks
- Focus on a wide-range of interconnected issues pertinent to women and rivers, such as biodiversity and conservation, climate change, community development, education, grassroots activism, indigenous sovereignty, research and knowledge creation, renewable energy development, tenure law and women's rights

“We were thrilled to participate in a gathering that specifically acknowledges and commends women for their invaluable, and often under recognized, service to protecting our freshwater resources.”

– CLAIRE POELKING, MACARTHUR FOUNDATION



Nuzhat Nueary, Oxfam Bangladesh



Sarah Kisita Mayala, AFECOJU



Romina Rivera Bravo, Citizen Movement Against Climate Change (MOCICC)

Day One



Kate Horner



Suvarna Basnet, NWCF

Building Trust, Sparking Inspiration

On day one, International River's Kate Horner and Oxfam's Jasdeep Randhawa provided a global overview of threats facing rivers, how women are rising to the challenge, and obstacles to gender equity in water governance.

A panel featuring, Kanokwan Manoram of Ubon Ratchathani University (Southeast Asia), Mela Chiponda of WoMin (Africa), Liliana Avila of Inter-American Association for Environmental Defense (Latin America), Manana Kochladze of Central and Eastern European Bankwatch (Europe), and Medha Bisht of South Asian University (South Asia) offered regional perspectives on the issues facing women and rivers.

This keyed-up regional break-out groups to map activities, challenges, and opportunities by region.

Followed by stories of inspiration from across the globe.



Kanokwan Manoram, Ubon Ratchatani University



Liliana Avila Garcia, AIDA

Day Two (International Women's Day)



Anabela Lemos of Justica Ambiental



Archana Chatterjee, IUCN

Deepening Our Understanding, Mobilizing for Change

Day two opened with a panel moderated by Indian journalist Bahar Dutt on how women's movements are being built, the experience of women leaders and confronting patriarchy in in water governance. It featured, Anabela Lemos of Justica Ambiental (Mozambique), Pratibha Brahma of Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India, Nguy Thi Khanh from Green ID (Vietnam), and Romina Rivera Bravo of Citizen's Movement Against Climate Change (Peru).

This set the stage for presentations and break-out groups around critical issues for women's river advocacy including:

- Conservation, Biodiversity, and Climate Disruption (facilitated by Archana Chatterjee at the International Union for Conservation of Nature)
- Law, Tenure, and Community Governance (facilitated by Stephanie Keene at Rights and Resources Initiative)
- Rivers and Gendered Livelihoods (Socheata Sim and Pauline Taylor-McKeown at Oxfam)
- Strengthening Women's Movements and Power (Maite Smet of GAGGA)

Participants assessed the critical issues in each realm and opportunities for collaboration.

A second round of break-out groups allowed participants to share strategies and explore collaboration around the following:

- Coordinated Communications
- Developing Gender Tools
- Indigenous Women's Issues
- Renewable Energy Access and Transformation
- Youth Activism

“Women are laying down their bodies and giving their lives to protect our rivers...our lifeblood. When women stand on equal footing with men in deciding the fate of our freshwater resources, the well-being of the planet and future generations will be assured”

Joan Carling, Indigenous Peoples Major Group for the Sustainable Development Goals

The Congress keynote speaker on International Women's Day was Joan Carling, Co-convenor of the Indigenous Peoples Major Group for the Sustainable Development Goals. As a long time activist for indigenous rights in the Philippines and globally, Joan reflected on her personal journey defending rivers and indigenous peoples rights to their lands, territories and water resources. Joan shared numerous stories of women on the frontline, and the importance of resilience and solidarity in river and women movements.



Day Three

Translating Vision Into Action

Building upon the prospects for collaboration charted in these sessions, participants charted a roadmap for action on:

- Resource Mobilization
- Generating Knowledge and Dialogue
- Strengthening the Movement & Collaborations for Change

Cross-regional dialogue breakout



Mapping breakout





Honkeo Douangdy, discussion on women's involvement in community management of fisheries.

Congress participants jointly developed a roadmap for collective action in the coming years. Each represented an extraordinary wealth of knowledge and capacity in their own right, and have committed to pursuing early stage actions across each of these domains. However, to be effective much more needs to be done. This roadmap charts a course and we welcome and encourage others to expand upon and join in this endeavor.

1. **Generating Knowledge and Influence.** While there are pockets of academic and local knowledge documenting the importance of women and rivers, it is largely decentralized, under-communicated, and under-utilized. Most importantly, this critical knowledge is not having the significant impact on water governance that it should. The result is that women's knowledge and interests remain marginalised, while political processes can too easily ignore them. Initiating a "state of knowledge report" that is co-created — drawing together academic review and community women local knowledge — was identified as a key next step in addressing the problem. It was also seen as critical to framing wider needs and opportunities for women's interests, while linking research/documentation with policy development and governance decision making.
2. **Resource mobilization.** Less than 0.2% of all philanthropic dollars are dedicated to women and the environment. To be successful, we need to work with and influence the philanthropic community to scale-up funding through

evidence-based storytelling and documentation of the urgency, need, and value of investing in rural women freshwater stewards. Increased funding should employ innovative, flexible funding approaches that genuinely respond to the needs of women at the forefront of change.

3. **Strengthening the movement.** While women have been at the forefront of efforts to protect rivers and river ecosystems for generations, the interconnected, trans-local global movement is nascent. Building on the success of this Congress, we need to build "grassrooted" alliances with community and grassroots women at the forefront of change with integrated ecosystem of support from NGOs, researchers, academics, and funders. Existing capacities and knowledge need to be bolstered and fortified. Risks or threats to safety, security, health, and wellbeing of women and river ecosystems need to be identified alongside mechanisms and allies at the local, national, and international level to provide redress and support. Women leaders will take the lead in developing legal and policy frameworks.
4. **Frame the narrative and tell our stories.** There is no unifying narrative that unites the initiative and struggles of women water stewards and protectors in common purpose. To be successful, we need to proactively develop and amplify positive framing and stories about the contributions of women and rivers leaders, as well as the threats they face, using traditional, social, and multi-media channels. Women on the frontlines should be prominent spokespeople in this growing movement, and should be supported with trainings and opportunities to speak forcefully and publicly about their experience and knowledge.

The Congress issued the following statement in more than 12 languages:

**NAGARKOT STATEMENT
WOMEN AND RIVERS CONGRESS 2019**

On 7-9 March 2019, 98 women activists, community members, researchers, practitioners, and journalists, representing 32 countries and every inhabited continent around the world, are gathered in Nepal for the first international Women and Rivers Congress. We have come together in solidarity to recognize and celebrate women as leaders and custodians of rivers and freshwater ecosystems. We are here to elevate women's voices, build alliances, and to learn from and strengthen each other's struggles and initiatives.

Water is life. Rivers sustain human life and all of earth's ecosystems and biodiversity. Rivers are our global commons; they belong to us all as well as to future generations. For women, rivers are our soul. As water collectors, peasants, caretakers, and stewards of natural resources, women's relationships with water throughout the life cycle are fundamental, yet too often invisible.

Everywhere, rivers, springs, and freshwater ecosystems are being destroyed, diverted, and degraded by dams, pollution, plantations, and over-extraction. Rivers are threatened by large-scale infrastructure and profit-driven development that ignores and obscures local and indigenous knowledge, culture, and ways of life. These threats undermine women's relationships to our shared resources by privileging economic values over ecological, spiritual, and customary values.

In this time of climate crisis, floods and droughts, and growing water scarcity, protecting rivers and people against existential threats is ever more urgent. We honor the women who have given their lives in the struggle to save our rivers and environmental commons for all who depend on them. We stand on the shoulders of women who have long been leaders in this movement and we celebrate their achievements. We join hands with local and indigenous communities who continue to face enormous peril in safeguarding their water and territories. We recognize that this is a long-term struggle and we recommit to supporting each other and welcoming other committed activists to our movement.

We stand together, united in solidarity. We commit to continuing our fight to protect free-flowing rivers and the lands, forests, and territories they sustain, to ensure women's leadership in decision-making at all levels over freshwater resources, and to strengthen and build alliances and grow our movement, for the future of ourselves as women, our families and communities, our rivers and our planet.

Translations of this text can be found at: <https://www.womenandrivers.com/statement>

Aruna Das, from the Mahabahu Brahmaputra Federation in Assam sings a song of prayer and tribute to nature to close the Congress |
Pai Deetes/International Rivers





Find out More

For more information on the Congress, visit WomenAndRivers.com and search #WomenAndRivers on social media, or email women-and-rivers-congress@internationalrivers.org

The Women and Rivers Congress was made possible with the generous support of:

The Congress was organized by International Rivers, a 35-year-old river advocacy, research, and network-building organization. It was supported by local host organisation, the Nepal Water Conservation Foundation.

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