

Position Paper

Accelerating Gender Equality in the Water Domain: A Call for Action



1. Introduction

Safe and adequate water availability for the home, the farm, and the community is central to gender equality, and to health, well-being and dignity for all. Yet, 25 years from the World Conference on Women in Beijing, gender equality in safe and accessible water is still not a reality. This Position Paper is a Call for Action to the global community to act, and to act now, towards the twin goals of safe and secure water for all and of women's participation and voice in water-related policies and decisions.

The Position Paper is based on many months of discussions and analyses led by the UNESCO WWAP Water and Gender Working Group, as reflected in the analysis document Taking Stock of Gender Equality in the Water Domain, and includes diverse contributions from international and regional organizations, governmental institutions, academia, NGOs, and local and national women leaders. The work was guided by three overarching frameworks promoting water as a human right, water for the achievement of gender equality and sustainability, and gender-aware climate adaptation water policies. Numerous studies and research papers were analyzed and supplemented by the Water and Gender working group's expertise; this resulted in an evidence-based synthesis of the current status of gender in the water sector. Key challenges were identified with respect to the human right to water; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for all; water for domestic as well as agricultural work; climate change adaptation; water governance; education and training needed to hold positions of authority within the water sector; and the data gaps in the gender and water sector. These challenges for, and recommendations towards, gender equality in the water sector are summarized below, with attention to both proximate and deep-rooted causes of gender-based inequalities in the sector.

Based on the findings of this analysis, we urge world leaders in all domains – governments, UN bodies, the private sector, civil society and community-based organizations, youth leaders, as well as educational and faith-based institutions – to rise to the challenge of water for all and meaningful participation of women in water. It is time to abandon incremental business-as-usual approaches and embrace ambitious yet concrete actions towards an inclusive and sustainable water domain through gender-equal pathways.

2. INTERNATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Three international frameworks guide this Position Paper: (i) The Human Rights-based Approach (HRBA) to Water and Sanitation; (ii) The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and (iii) The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Building on a series of Declarations and Conferences, including at Beijing in 1995, the UN officially declared safe drinking water and sanitation to be human rights.¹ The right to water and sanitation were deemed essential for the realization of other rights, making these “gateway” rights to the enjoyment of a suite of rights. The same proclamation called for the promotion of full and equal participation for women in water decision-making, casting women not as “beneficiaries” but as change agents in the effort to meet a HRBA to water and sanitation. This is in line with the Dublin principles that conveys how policies should not only reflect women's pivotal role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water, but also address women's specific needs and empower them in decision-making related to water.

¹ UN Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights 2002; UN General Assembly Resolution 64/292 2010.

In 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, consisting of 17 Goals. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 calls for equality and empowerment for girls and women; and SDG 6 calls for universal access to safe water and sanitation, with particular attention to the needs of women and girls. The SDGs are cross-cutting and include individual targets that are relevant for several goals. For instance, Target 5.4 calls for recognizing unpaid labor through the provision of public services and infrastructure; this target is relevant for women's empowerment (SDG 5) and also for universal access to (domestic) water (SDG 6). The integration of gender equality is not consistent across SDGs or even within SDG 6 itself, however. Moreover, SDG-relevant data collected by household may conceal intra-household inequalities.

The third guiding framework, the UNFCCC, recognizes that climate change disproportionately affects low-income and rural women. This led to the explicit incorporation of gender equality into the 2015 Paris Agreement. In alignment, the UNFCCC promotes intersectional approaches to climate policies and importantly, avoids stereotyping women as either environmental victims or sustainability saviors².

Despite these policy efforts, it has been noted that actual water and climate policies still remain siloed from gender policies,³ resulting in a wedge between policy and practice.

3. CURRENT STATUS

In this section we synthesize the findings on the status of women with respect to the human rights to water and sanitation, water and work, inclusion in water governance, education and training to participate in the water sector,⁴ and data on access to and availability of water and sanitation services.

Achieving the Human Rights to water and sanitation requires accessible, available and affordable water that is safe for drinking, cooking and hygiene. Treated piped water is the highest rung of the service ladder; as of 2017, ~63.5% of households globally were served by piped water.⁵ At the other end, 1.6 billion people live in households in which someone must walk to collect (improved) water, most of whom are women and girls who pay the price in preventable diseases, stress, musculoskeletal trauma, sexual assault, and time loss. Beyond the household, one in six healthcare facilities have no handwashing stations, which are crucial for combatting COVID-19, the lack of which increases risks for patients and frontline, majority female, healthcare workers. Inadequate WASH in schools reduces the attendance of post-puberty girls as well as teachers, showing why water and sanitation are considered gateway or precursor rights.

Water is necessary in productive as well as in domestic and care work. In almost all countries, social norms dictate that women carry an unbalanced share of household work. Such work includes preparing meals, housekeeping, managing scarce water, maintaining animals and kitchen plots, and running micro-enterprises. These activities are all impeded by the crises of local water scarcity and global climate change; furthermore, the labor is unpaid and, even when revenue-generating, is generally unaccounted for.⁶ Outside the home, 32% of employment in agriculture is female, though cultural norms often dictate the nature of the work. Women farmers and marginal landholders do not have equal access to water rights, because water rights are usually allocated to men who

² Cf. UN Women World Survey 2014.

³ UN Women and UNESCO Policy Brief forthcoming.

⁴ Job creation and training in the water sector are key recommendations for accelerating the SDGs (UN Water n.d.).

⁵ (<https://washdata.org/data/household#!/dashboard/new>).

⁶ UN Women and UNESCO Policy Brief 2020.

are often the ones holding formal land titles. As climate change shrinks available water for farming, women are rendered more vulnerable with respect to income security as well as food security.⁷ With intersecting marginalities, such as with indigenous women, or ethnic-minority women, these vulnerabilities are all the more acute.

Women are also under-represented in the formal water sector, e.g. in utilities, but over-represented in the lowest-paid jobs in the informal sector, e.g. cleaning out unsewered latrines. Multi-country studies have shown that under 20% of employees in the water and sanitation utilities are women, who are paid on average less than their male counterparts.⁸ The equivalent gender data on employment in the informal sector are generally missing. Existing gender norms, stereotyping of women's capacities, sexual harassment at work, and the small number of STEM-educated female graduates contribute to their low numbers in formal water institutions. Recent surveys, however, show that female employment in utilities is increasing. Greater gender parity in positions of authority could influence infrastructure decisions and financial allocations to essential services.

All institutions reflect and reproduce social norms and disparities, so it is no surprise that institutions for water governance have few women overall, and even fewer in positions of authority. While a UN ECOSOC study showed that 61% of countries support women's participation in natural resource management as a matter of policy, fewer than half provided targeted support to enable participation in practice, clearly illustrating the wedge between policy and implementation.⁹ Women are severely under-represented in water ministries around the world and nearly invisible in transboundary water governance.¹⁰

The low participation of women in water management and water governance is due in no small part to their low levels of education and training for technical and leadership positions in the water sector. The water sector is dominated by STEM-trained professionals, and gender stereotypes prevent many women from the degrees they would need to work as water professionals. Surveys in East Africa, for instance, have found that even when managers are open to hiring more women, few women apply. Additionally, women face entry barriers, disabling environments after entry, wage discrimination, or lack of support if they are young mothers, in the water sector.¹¹

Taken together, we find that the unmet human right to water and sanitation; unequal rights to water for agricultural production; low participation in local and national institutions that manage and govern water; policy support for women's participation without strong backing for such participation in practice; pervasive gender stereotyping; and unequal opportunities for all genders to train for skilled jobs in the water sector combine to keep too many people from accessing safe water, too many women from occupying decision-making positions that channel water, and too many communities from receiving the support needed for achieving gender parity. Climate change, of course, exacerbates all of these difficulties.

Yet, the information that we have today may actually underestimate the extent of gender inequality in access to water or the work that women do to ensure water security. Only one in three countries routinely collects sex-disaggregated data for informal employment, unpaid labor, home-based entrepreneurship or time use. No country systematically collects sex-disaggregated data on intra-household water uses and water and sanitation access. Yet we cannot assume that water available to a household is equally accessible to all its members. Little data is available on the occupational health of women and girls who fetch water, or the physical and psychological health of women carrying out high-risk and low-paid work in the sanitation sector.

⁷ FAO. 2017. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World <http://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition/2017/en.FAO/IFAD/IOM/WFP>.

⁸ UNESCO-UN Water 2016; World Bank 2019.

⁹ ECOSOC 2019.

¹⁰ See Fauconnier et al 2018.

¹¹ WSUP 2020; Leahy et al 2017.

4. SUGGESTED ACTIONS GOING FORWARD

Much progress has been made since Beijing 1995, but much work remains. We highlight five key suggestions for action that can form the foundation for gender equality in the water sector and for realizing the human rights to water and sanitation for all. These steps can enhance the bargaining power of women, increase their options, make their contributions visible and valuable to all, and thus support lives of dignity and self-worth for all.¹²

(i) Follow principles of gender-equal funding.

Funding better water services for the underserved is always a challenge. Safely managed drinking water access calls for water to be delivered as close to premises as feasible;¹³ water service for smallholders calls for investments that promote women's leadership and protect their water rights. It is not easy for low- and middle-income countries to invest in water systems, especially for unserved populations who may be hard to reach. Here, mobilization of international and donor assistance, and better targeting of existing funding, will be key. It is however important for funding policies to ensure that water investments no longer rely on the unpaid work of women and girls. The Green Climate Fund provides a good example of gender mainstreaming and gender assessment as a requirement for all projects.¹⁴ We do not believe that more funding alone will ensure safe and secure water rights for all. However, public finance for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action has been shown to fall short and gender strategies in the water sector are seldom funded adequately. Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, goals related to reducing inequalities were among those least funded¹⁵, undermining momentum towards the achievement of the overall Agenda.”

(ii) Narrow the gap between policy and practice.

Pervasive gaps between stated policy and its implementation show that political leadership, and water sector leaders, know that water is a human right that remains unmet for millions of women and men, and that women's voices are essential to gender parity in water-related decision-making. At all levels of water policy, governments are encouraged to protect women's land and water rights, strengthen regulatory frameworks for accountability and redress when gender-equal policies are flouted, and realistically assess the gendered consequences of new policies and their likely implementation. In short, more states must live up to the implicit social contract they have with their citizens; upholding women's rights and water rights are part of this social contract. Community-based organizations working on water rights or women's rights have a key role in holding their governments accountable, and staying vigilant with respect to emerging wedges between laudable policy goals and their slippage in practice.

(iii) Foster women's leadership (beyond participation).

All institutions, especially those in the water sector, need to go beyond tokenistic participation or participation that increases women's labor contributions but not their authority, to foster women's leadership at all levels. Tokenistic mainstreaming efforts can be only partially successful, and mandatory inclusion rules imposed by NGOs and donors have often not taken into account existing social barriers, even when these are well known.¹⁶ Going beyond women's participation to women's leadership calls for strategic gender mainstreaming within practical possibilities, capacity development (for all genders, at all levels of decision-making), and the deliberate promotion of environments in which women's leadership is accepted. There is encouraging evidence that Indian villages with women leaders tend to invest more in basic infrastructure such as roads and drinking water, and that services-oriented priorities are also reflected when more women are represented in national-level leadership.¹⁷

¹² See Nussbaum 2000.

¹³ <https://washdata.org/monitoring/drinking-water>.

¹⁴ <https://www.greenclimate.fund/document/gcf-b24-15>.

¹⁵ See Sethi et al. 2017. <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/realizing-agenda-2030-will-donor-dollars-and-country-priorities-align-with-global-goals>.

¹⁶ Cornwall and Rivas 2015.

¹⁷ Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Dongre 2010; Jalal 2014.

(iv) Counter norms and stereotypes that disadvantage women and girls.

Policies and practices that support genuine inclusion of women's (and girls') rights in the water sector and beyond, and fostering environments in which women's leadership gradually becomes normalized, are not possible without focused efforts to counter norms, stereotypes and taboos that are still prevalent in many contexts. Norms and stereotypes that disadvantage women's roles in the workplace or in the community include social expectations of women's work at home, implicit taboos with respect to where they should or should not work, pervasive impressions that men cannot work under more senior women, and pervasive sexual harassment. Public interest messaging, school curricula, and local and national leaders, celebrities and influencers could all be harnessed in this effort. Public interest messaging that recognizes and values women's unpaid care work in the home and in the community is important; by contrast, prevailing norms simultaneously demand and devalue such work. As opportunities grow for women and girls to be educated, to hold paid jobs, to enter "male" fields of study, and to know and assert their legal rights, these opportunities and efforts to counter norms and stereotypes can be mutually reinforcing.

(v) Prioritize collection of sex-disaggregated data.

Even if the four recommendations above are meticulously followed, we cannot know their impact without sex-disaggregated data. Data by sex are routinely collected in the education, health, and (formal) employment sectors, but data on water access or climate adaptation are usually presented by household. Yet the household is a social unit with power imbalances within it; data is needed on who has the right to water, how much labor goes into accessing water, who does the work, who uses the water, and for what purposes. This is commensurate with the human right to water, which is an inalienable right of individuals rather than of "the" household. Likewise, we have little systematic data on who adapts to climate-induced water source changes and in what ways. UNESCO has developed a useful toolkit to collect gender-responsive water data on a wide range of development topics;¹⁸ the UN Statistical Division has also proposed a minimum set of gender indicators for country-level data.¹⁹ We recognize that collecting additional data places burdens on the technical and financial capacities of low-income countries;²⁰ therefore, this is a priority area for capacity development and financial support. In short, sex-disaggregated data on water access, use and control are essential for monitoring progressive realization of the HRBA to water and sanitation, and for "counting" the uncounted work that women do and the numerous daily decisions that they make. The call for these data has been repeatedly made by scholars and activists since at least the 1970s, and it is well past time to heed this call.

5. CALL FOR ACTION

The first Pillar of the Call for Action enjoins all members of the global community, from the Member States, to the United Nations to community groups, to follow the key recommendations above, in their own distinct capacities, and leaning into their own comparative advantages. We mention here some priority actions.

Governments are the most important duty bearers; they have the responsibility to (i) fund water systems for all more generously; (ii) collect accurate information about households in underserved areas, by gender and not by household; (iii) review subsidy policies to make water services more affordable for the poor and equally accessible for all; (iv) support and fund women's and community-based groups to organize to sustainably meet their own water and sanitation needs; (v) communicate gender equality and deliberately dispel harmful gender

¹⁸ Miletto et al., 2019.

¹⁹ UNSD and DESA 2020 (<https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com/>).

²⁰ UN Women and UNESCO forthcoming; p 15.

stereotypes in all public service statements; (vi) set an example by hiring and elevating women in water-related agencies; and (vii) ensure equal wages for equal work. In other words, investing in water and countering harmful stereotypes go hand-in-hand, each reinforcing the other. The UN agencies can further advance efforts to the implementation of gender mainstreaming, and to leverage their collective power to (i) encourage Member States to mobilize funding for safe and affordable water infrastructures, especially for their poorest citizens; (ii) support Member States with capacity programmes to enhance capacity on water-and gender-related topics, and (iii) assist Member States with gender-disaggregated data collection methodologies and digitization. The grant-making and donor communities could support the States by increasing their investments in the water and sanitation domains; in awareness and capacity development to elevate social inclusion; in support of women-led initiatives, and in the critical collection of disaggregated data. Financial assistance needs to be deliberately re-directed to prioritize low- and low-middle income countries, which is not always the case today.

The private sector (including utilities) are well-positioned to work with governments to raise capital for water systems, especially focusing on innovative technologies and financing strategies that are sustainable for low-income communities, but that do not rely on unpaid work by women. They can bring considerable advertising experience, using empowering images of women and girls, to bear on social marketing campaigns aimed at safe and productive water uses. Academic researchers could take it upon themselves to document and communicate (beyond academia) the economic, social and health impacts of safe water, sanitation and irrigation rights for women and girls. Their research can usefully focus on alternative technologies and creative financing options to make water services affordable for all, for home use and local economies, but with care not to burden women with more unpaid chores. Civil society, including faith-based, secular and women's groups, have a critical role in prioritizing activities that raise women's voices so they have an equal role in decisions on local water-related investments. Being close to communities, they can advise both governments and private utilities on strategies that can ensure access to safe and affordable services. Most importantly, civil society has a watchdog mandate; civil society and the media are uniquely positioned to hold governments and the private sector accountable for extending basic services to all.

The second Pillar concerns communication. Every group of stakeholders – and water is such a basic need that all groups are de facto stakeholders here – is encouraged to take the suggested concrete actions to their publics, through social media, traditional communications channels, works of art, films and official public communications. These recommendations and their urgency need to be communicated widely, building global awareness and a basis for public action. Media and communications have an invaluable role to play in informing various constituencies about international and national water fora, increasing their visibility. On the gender equality side, communications are invaluable for undermining norms and stereotypes; fostering collaborations across genders and cultures; elevating the place of girls and women in education, water (and other) careers; and elevating the value of domestic work so that women's families and communities perceive their value to the household economy.

In short, this Call, facilitated by UNESCO WWAP, aims to unite the global community towards the goal of water for all with an equal voice in related decisions-making, and the empowerment of women in water. To this end, the Call urges for targeted outreach, concrete action, and no more faltering in political will. A safe, secure and equal water domain is nothing less than a form of freedom.²¹

²¹ We borrow this phrase from Nelson Mandela's 1994 autobiography.

DRAFT



unesco

World Water
Assessment Programme

Contacts:

Laura Imburgia: lv.imburgia@unesco.org

Laurens Thuy: l.thuy@unesco.org

UNESCO WWAP Water and Gender Component