



## Where We Stand Position Paper: Water and Sanitation

Reviewed May 2024

### Position Summary:

- Gender inequality makes women and girls more vulnerable to the water crisis and can exacerbate their risks of poverty, poor health, food insecurity and violence;
- Progress to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all remains unequally implemented across the world;
- Gender-responsive budgeting can be a pivotal tool to improve the global water situation by ensuring that finances reach local communities.

### Where Things Stand:

According to a 2023 UN Water report, data on the water nexus reveal that the human rights to water and sanitation are far from realised for many women and girls globally. In 2023, an estimated 380 million women and girls in 26 countries lived in a context of high or critical water stress. By 2030, the number is predicted to rise to 471 million women and girls in 29 countries.

Women and girls play a crucial role in their communities as the main collectors and protectors of water. Yet, gender inequality makes women and girls more vulnerable to the water crisis and can exacerbate their risks of poverty, poor health, food insecurity and violence. Women's perspectives, in particular those from marginalised groups including but not limited to indigenous women, refugee women, rural women, and women living with disabilities, have for too long been ignored. These marginalised groups face increased barriers to accessing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, often because of poverty. In addition, they are often excluded from the management and governance of water; and their rights to land continue to be undermined in many countries.

Equitable access to safe drinking water and sanitation is recognised as an integral component of the realisation of all human rights. Adequate WASH facilities are fundamental to good health and social and economic development. Access to WASH facilities has positive impacts, including improved health outcomes, privacy, and safety. For example, the availability of a latrine within the household reduces the risk of women and girls experiencing physical or sexual assault in cases where they are forced to resort to open defecation. In addition, school sanitation facilities mean that girls are



less likely to miss school because of staying home during menstruation.

Major causes of the current global water crisis include climate change, increased demand, and pollution and mismanagement. The number of people exposed to flood-prone areas has risen by almost 25 per cent since 2000 due to the impacts of global warming, including extreme weather events like rising sea levels and more intense hurricanes. Globally, water use has steadily increased by approximately 1 per cent annually over the last four decades and is projected to increase by another 20 to 30 per cent by 2050.

Unfortunately, progress to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all remains unequally implemented across the world. This can be partly attributed to the lack of women in leadership positions in financial decision-making and a lack of progress in harnessing gender-responsive budgeting mechanisms. Gender-responsive budgeting focuses on promoting gender equity through strategies like increasing women's participation in budget processes and ensuring accountability and transparency in fiscal policy planning. However, patriarchal power structures continue to skew budget allocations away from reaching women and other marginalised groups.

### **Where things need to go...**

Recognising all women's and girls' access to universal and improved WASH facilities is central to sustainable development, in particular to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 on gender equality, and SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation. Thus, protecting water ecosystems and ensuring the human rights and wellbeing of all women and girls goes hand in hand.

### **Fundamental Actions:**

- Governments and all stakeholders must respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of all women and girls across the WASH sector;
- Governments and all stakeholders should empower all women and girls to be leaders, experts and agents of change across the WASH sector;
- Governments should adopt legal frameworks and institutions to protect and conserve water resources in an equitable manner, including by fulfilling women's rights to accessing and owning land;
- Governments must urgently address gender disparities in financial



resource allocation, advocating for gender-responsive budgeting;

- Governments and all stakeholders must mainstream an intersectional gender perspective in monitoring SDG 6 towards gaining a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of progress in the WASH sector;
- Governments and all stakeholders, including at the local level, should promote a holistic approach to WASH education, public awareness and global collective action to reverse unequal and unsustainable production and consumption patterns and improve individual and community wellbeing;
- Governments and all stakeholders must establish gender-sensitive climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, led by women and other vulnerable populations; and
- SDGs 5 and 6 require a recognised place in any intergovernmental process connected to the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

### **Additional Actions:**

Governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society, the private sector (including businesses), other institutions and individuals must ensure that all women share in the decision-making process on an equal footing with men and boys in accessing WASH services.

- **Raise awareness of water and sanitation:** No woman or girl is immune to the adverse effects of unsafe water and poor hygiene, including disease, interrupted education, and limited employment opportunities. Training programmes and capacity-building targeted at promoting gender equality and supporting their role in implementing water and sanitation policy and programmes should raise awareness among all women and girls of the benefits of improved water, sanitation and hygiene. Community-level health campaigns should also include the importance of sanitation and hygiene with the view of empowering all women and girls to recognise and choose options that improve their situation.
- **Conduct research and monitoring; collect and use disaggregated data:** Data collection mechanisms to collate accurate and reliable qualitative and quantitative data disaggregated by gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, language, religion, disability, place, and other relevant descriptors should be installed to monitor inequalities and gaps. The data collected will be valuable for informing water- and sanitation-related policies, laws, and plans, and when



designing, monitoring, and evaluating projects and programmes that provide development aid and services to women and girls.

- **Provide education and access to decent work:** The lack of water and sanitation disproportionately worsens the earnings and employment opportunities for women. Ensuring that all women and girls have access to safe, inclusive, quality education throughout the life course is essential to improving their employment opportunities, safety, and wellbeing.

### Where Soroptimist International Stands:

Soroptimist International recognises that a lack of safe water, sanitation and hygiene affects the well-being of individuals and poses a risk to sustainable development. Soroptimist International believes that an immediate integrated effort to ensure universal water, sanitation and hygiene facilities includes strategies to protect the concerns and challenges faced by all women and girls.

Soroptimist International critically engages with the reporting and monitoring processes of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Universal Periodic Review (UPR), United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, demonstrating the link between SDG 5 and 6 to ensure the voices of all women and girls are heard, all while inducing governments to act to provide safe, accessible water and sanitation infrastructure.

Soroptimist International supports the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through its Federations, Unions, Regions, Clubs, by working on the ground with partner organisations and UN agencies to Educate, Empower and Enable all women and girls everywhere.

### Sources:

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