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Elements of a joint action agenda on women's rights to water and sanitation

Outcomes of an online consultation June-July 2020

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At a time when access to clean water is more vital than ever, the most recent data by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme show an estimated **785 million people worldwide still lack basic water services and 2 billion lack basic sanitation**. These massive inequalities in access contribute significantly to the gendered burden of unpaid care work. Women and girls are responsible for water collection in 80% of households without access to water on the premises, according to [data from 61 developing countries](#).

Beyond their household work burdens, women and girls also face specific challenges caused by insufficient water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in schools and healthcare facilities – disrupting their educations, preventing them from accessing sexual and reproductive health services, and impacting their livelihoods as frontline health workers.

The continuing COVID-19 health crisis makes these inequalities in access to WASH even more visible. Three billion people do not have handwashing facilities at home, so women and girls have been taking on increased responsibilities for water collection in constrained and dangerous circumstances. The gendered impacts of COVID-19 and insufficient access to WASH are worsened by the climate crisis, which is projected to significantly increase water scarcity and stress.

2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a progressive blueprint for women's rights and gender equality agreed by world governments at the historic Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. It set out a foundational global agenda for women's rights – including a collective commitment to 'ensure the availability of and universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation and put in place effective public distribution systems as soon as possible.'

Re-examining these commitments requires reiterating the importance of access to WASH in fulfilling the rights of women and girls, and making WASH systems gender-responsive is even more urgent in the context of the climate crisis and the global COVID-19 pandemic.

To celebrate this landmark agreement for gender equality – and illustrate how far away we still are from many of its objectives – ActionAid and WaterAid consulted experienced activists and thinkers to gather a nuanced analysis and chart a global path forward for collective advocacy on WASH and gender. Outlined here are the recommendations garnered from the [open consultation](#) – compiled from 67 contributors from 34 countries spanning the breadth of the Global South, with input from the Global North too. [See Box 1 below for more details on the contributors.] This document summarises the initial discussions emerging from the e-consultation, together with a virtual event co-organized by ActionAid and WaterAid in October 2020, and points towards an agenda for further debate and action.

● **Sitan Diarra, 65, president of women's group Djekafo, next to some finished products at the soap production facility in the village of Diena, district of Bla, Mali, October 2018.**



WaterAid/Basile Ouedraogo

Accessible WASH at the heart of action towards gender equality, now more than ever

Summary of recommendations from the e-consultation and webinar

1. Universal access to quality gender-responsive WASH services redistributes women's and girls' burden of unpaid care and domestic work and fulfils their rights

Universal access to clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene is critical to addressing gender inequalities and fulfilling the rights of women and girls:

- **Education, work and leisure:** when safe and appropriate sanitation services for menstruation are provided at schools and workplaces, absenteeism is reduced. When freed from spending hours finding and collecting water, women and girls can invest that time in study, paid work or leisure – vital human rights.
- **Health and happiness:** through improved gender-responsive WASH facilities in health centres and homes, women can exercise their rights to sexual and reproductive health. Water, sanitation and hygiene are not only essential for health and safety during the reproductive cycle, but also play a critical role in maintaining sexual health, and preventing and treating infections and injuries. Without

clean water, decent sanitation and good hygiene practices, menstruation can feel like a burden, pregnancy and childbirth pose greater health risks, and it becomes harder to manage and prevent the spread of infections. Through access to clean water and sanitation at home, women and girls stay healthy, avoiding illnesses or exhaustion that damage their wellbeing.

- **Safety and privacy:** providing accessible gender-responsive services includes eliminating violence and harassment by removing risks to the personal safety and privacy of women and girls seeking WASH services. This is particularly essential for those with disabilities.
- **Reducing poverty:** universal access to publicly delivered and financed WASH will ensure women and their families no longer have to frequently pay premiums for expensive, informal services.

2. Achieving universal access to safe and gender responsive WASH for women and girls requires transforming policy, programming, and budgets

Ensuring universal access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is vital to protect and promote the rights of women and girls. Committed action at policy, programming and budgeting is necessary **at all levels** to enact the changes required to address gender inequalities.

- **Include women in decision-making and promote women's leadership:** at programme, policy and budget levels women are still largely underrepresented in major decision-making. Ensuring women's leadership in the design, management and governance of WASH services and resources ensures that these services respond to the perspectives and needs of women and girls.
- **Leverage the knowledge of women who rely on WASH services at community level:** ensure that a specific mechanism for community involvement informs decision-making around WASH and that there is frequent ongoing consultation and monitoring with women in communities, including through their local collectives and associations. In doing this, acknowledge



the intersecting forms of discrimination or oppression (such as on the basis of age, ethnicity, caste, race, migrant status, class and others) that impact different groups of women and make every effort to incorporate this specific analysis at all stages of decision making.

- **National strategies for gender equality must include universal access to gender responsive WASH services to redistribute women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work:** women (and girls) continue to subsidise, through their unpaid labour, state failure to provide publicly funded, universal and gender responsive public services. National gender equality strategies must incorporate rights to safe WASH in the context of wider labour and economic rights for women.
- **Enact, adopt and enforce laws and policies that hold corporations accountable for rights:** governments must regulate and hold corporations, including mining companies, to account for local water pollution or any other practice or behaviour that limits access to rights to WASH. This includes ensuring that they pay their fair share of taxes. Existing policies must be properly implemented and providers must be held to account for the operations and maintenance of their services.
- **Make water services universally accessible to all:** WASH has long been low on the priority list for national budgets and development assistance, leaving households with high costs for connection, use and maintenance of services. Governments and their policies must prioritise providing water services for their populations and reject privatisation of water and sanitation. WASH must be valued as part of an essential package of public services, publicly delivered and financed and sustained by strong institutions.

Programming

- **Effective and gender-specific planning, monitoring and evaluation:** planning and design of water service programmes should aim to transform and eliminate gender inequalities. By providing robust monitoring mechanisms and ensuring systems that are designed to measure gendered outcomes,

reliable reports can be created with gender-disaggregated data. Analysis from such reports will allow for continued gender-specific action (including in response to COVID-19).

- **Reinforce knowledge and capacities for women and girls to demand their rights to WASH:** through providing age-appropriate menstrual health and hygiene education for children and adolescents and investing in WASH education in formal learning environments, women and girls will have knowledge necessary to demand the delivery of their rights to safe, quality gender-responsive services. Bolstering local and national education systems can help challenge and address broader gender inequalities.
- **Recognise and respond to all women's needs:** through designing programmes that include physical infrastructure for women with disabilities. In addition, create formal spaces and education programmes to hold conversations and address stigma associated with disability.

Budget investment

- **Ensure adequate budget for implementation and proper maintenance of public WASH services for all – including creating a public water fund:** governments must ensure that cost/benefit analyses take into account all socioeconomic considerations (including gender-specific components) prior to designing programmes. Budgets must be allocated in line with realistic needs assessments (including of women and girls) to ensure sustainable services. Regional inequalities must be recognized and considered in the planning of a new investment cycles and governments must reject privatisation of water resources to ensure safe WASH infrastructure regardless of income, landholding status, location or gender.
- **Mobilize funds to implement gender-responsive policy commitments:** budgets for women's facilities should not be reduced, and there must be dedicated funds for implementing gender-responsive policy commitments.

- **Invest in gender analysis:** ensure coordination across sectors to enable data collection and analysis to promote gender-responsive WASH services. This should include developing indicators for progress on WASH and gender, ensuring disaggregation by gender and other factors, and robust monitoring and evaluation at national level.

3. International actors, including international financial institutions, must adopt urgent action to ensure women's and girls' rights to WASH

Integration of WASH into the priorities of international actors, especially international financial institutions responsible for development lending and grant-making, is fundamental to advance gender-responsive WASH. The nexus between WASH and gender should be integrated into decision-making around spending and through partnerships at the international level. In particular, international actors should:

- **Remove austerity measures that promote the shrinking of public funding for public services and of the wider public sector as conditions for loans or development assistance.** This includes any reduction of the role of the state through the commodification and privatisation of public services or any other restrictions on state ability to ensure universal and publicly delivered access to them. This also includes the urgent and fair resolution of the unsustainable debt crises affecting many Global South countries particularly as they struggle to respond and recover from the economic devastation wreaked by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Provide technical support:** international actors have the resources to support the scaling up of best practices across countries and the strengthening of systems – including through research, capacity building programmes and data collection. They must incorporate the knowledge and leadership of women at all levels, support local community organizing and ensure that locally developed solutions are promoted.
- **Coordinate key global stakeholders to form inclusive policies:** international actors must facilitate partnerships

and conversations across institutions, communities, local partners, local women's organisations, the private sector, water service providers and governments. This approach streamlines work; encourages the development of comprehensive, integrated WASH strategies; promotes access to WASH as a public service and ensures gender-responsive, inclusive policies.

- **Hold all actors to account:** through holding wealthy income earners, corporates and service providers to account, international actors pressure key stakeholders to deliver on access to WASH and ensure accountability and transparency.
- **Prioritise the environment:** in all work, international actors must promote biodiversity conservation (of rivers and natural water sources) and enforce international laws to protect water sources. Financial institutions must restrict and defund projects which damage the environment.

4. Urgently increasing access to safe WASH for women and girls through COVID-19 response and recovery

To have lasting positive effects, any efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic must be grounded in an accurate understanding of the current context. This includes increasing efforts to collect and use data that highlights structural inequalities and the differentiated impacts of COVID-19 on different populations.



- **Ensure gender-responsive WASH service provision for all:** handwashing and hygiene facilities must be made available, affordable, accessible and culturally appropriate as a priority, including through provision of both emergency and sustainable services. Quality, gender-responsive public WASH services must be scaled up, especially in informal settlements.
 - **Women's and girls' involvement in project design now for gender-responsive programmes of the future:** through participatory engagement of women and girls in COVID-19 response design, prioritising and being informed by women's knowledge and leadership at all levels, improving access to WASH services for women and girls and reducing gendered inequalities.
 - **Leverage the international hygiene focus to demand access to WASH for all:** use hyper-awareness of hygiene as a catalyst for creating multi-stakeholder (national and international governments and NGOs) campaigns to highlight gendered impacts of climate change and improve access to hand hygiene, and WASH more broadly, for women and girls. Continue to advocate for rights to adequate water supply for all – beyond household level to include public spaces where informal workers (a majority of whom are women) operate, informal settlements, and prisons, for example.
 - **Provide women with the skills for technical roles and the protection needed by frontline workers:** through integrating and employing women in water and sanitation operations, gendered issues relating to WASH services (including considerations for menstrual and maternal health) will be better represented and implemented. In the context of COVID-19, this is especially important for public sector health workers and sanitation workers, a large proportion of whom are women.
 - **Ensure gender-responsive COVID-19 related policies – including recovery funding:** governments must take measures necessary to ensure universal access to hygiene, water and sanitation, by increasing funding for WASH services, and subsidising water utilities to support low-income families and women and girls. By including and consulting women in formulating COVID-19 recovery policies, governments will capture the unique experiences of women during the pandemic, promote policies to address their specific situations and prioritise the necessary funding.
- 5. Protecting women's and girls' access to WASH in the face of worsening climate crises**
- **Climate adaptation programmes must incorporate gender-responsive WASH:** climate-induced crises that impact community access to water have detrimental effects on women and girls, both in terms of their own WASH access and their increased labour sourcing water for their households. Therefore, climate-resilient, sustainable WASH infrastructure at the household level can help protect women and girls from the impact of insufficient access, especially through helping prevent gender-based violence and ensuring menstrual health.
 - **Inclusive planning, implementation and ongoing management of WASH services is essential to climate resilience:** the participation and decision-making of women is fundamental to all stages of service provision. Women's involvement is at the core of climate solutions, resulting in approaches that are both climate-resilient and gender-responsive.
 - **Prioritise WASH in climate financing:** and resource women's knowledge, leadership and organizing in managing recovery funding and initiatives
 - **Introduce climate-informed WASH policies:** through aligning the principles and approaches of the 2030 Agenda to effective, climate risk-informed and shock responsive climate policies, sustainable WASH infrastructure will be implemented – and the social welfare of all (including women and girls) prioritised.
 - **Quantify existing issues with quality data:** through quality research, ongoing monitoring and an analysis of gender-disaggregated data, increase evidence to highlight the differential impacts of the climate crisis on women and girls' access to WASH.

Contributors

67 total

● Language

- English: 52
- Spanish: 8
- French: 5
- Portuguese: 2

● Countries (34)

West Africa:

- Ghana
- Nigeria (4)
- Sierra Leone
- Benin
- Ivory Coast
- Liberia
- Togo

East Africa:

- Kenya (6)
- Rwanda
- Sudan
- Malawi

Central Africa:

- Cameroon (2)
- Democratic Republic of the Congo

Southern Africa:

- Botswana

Western Europe and Other States:

- France (2)
- UK (2)
- Australia (3)
- USA (6)

Asia and the Pacific:

- Myanmar (2)
- Indonesia
- India (4)
- Bangladesh (2)
- Sri Lanka
- Palestine
- Vanuatu

Latin America:

- Honduras
- Argentina
- Colombia
- Mexico
- Brazil (2)
- Guatemala
- Nicaragua
- Chile
- Venezuela

● Affiliation

- INGOs
- NGOs
- CSOs
- Academia
- Service providers
- WASH sector representatives



● Sanju Mewada along with the members of the youth group of girls engage in the task of testing local water sources at Raipur Nayakheda, Madhya Pradesh, India, September 2018.



WaterAid/Ernest Randriarimalala



● **13 kilometres away from Tsarafangitra village, Raoly with other strong women from Tsarafangitra village excavating the trench (digging ricefield here) for the pipeline connection. Tsarafangitra village, Belavabary commune, Moramanga district, Alaotra Mangoro region, Madagascar. July 2017.**

Virtual event

On 7 October 2020, ActionAid and WaterAid organised a virtual event on “WASH, gender equality and Beijing+25: holding states to account”. Marking the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, this roundtable discussion brought together WASH and gender activists, academics and institutions to generate views on advancing a joint action agenda on gender equality and water, sanitation and hygiene.

Building on the discussions outlined in the e-consultation, the virtual event featured representatives from FEMNET, Myanmar’s Gender Equality Network, and PSI’s World Women’s Committee, as well as UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water and sanitation Léo Heller, academic Pedi Obani and activist Mithu Garai Mallik.

To watch the video of the webinar please click [here](#).

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