

# Gender & SDG 6: The Critical Connection

A Framing Paper  
for the High-Level Panel on Water

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# Introduction

*“The lack of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities that meet women and girls’ needs can be largely attributed to the absence of women’s participation in decision-making and planning”*

Mr Léo Heller – second Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Goal 6) to “ensure access to clean water and sanitation for all” requires explicit attention to gender equality and social inclusion. Universal access to safely managed water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and appropriate management of water resources will only be achieved if the rights of women and marginalised peoples are fulfilled. Inequality, discrimination and social exclusion can be found within water governance and WASH policies, strategies and access to services. Social exclusion is often experienced by women; cultural minorities; youth; people with disabilities; older people; transgender and intersex people; the poorest of the poor; people considered low-caste; and indigenous peoples. The human right to water and sanitation, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), call for the inclusion of all, equal rights for women, and the elimination of discrimination between people based on their age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status. It also requires attention to multiple dimensions of discrimination, or “intersectionality”, for instance women from a particular ethnic group suffering exclusion due to both their sex and their ethnicity.

The integrated SDGs present a timely opportunity for all actors, at all levels, to explicitly address gender discrimination and inequality, and to proactively facilitate women’s voice, participation and empowerment. As explored in this Framing Paper, Goal 6 and the High-Level Panel on Water Action Plan can significantly contribute to gender equality in both water resources management and WASH, and by doing so, they will contribute to more sustainable and effective water management outcomes for all people, while decreasing the inequalities prevalent in many societies.

## Key Messages

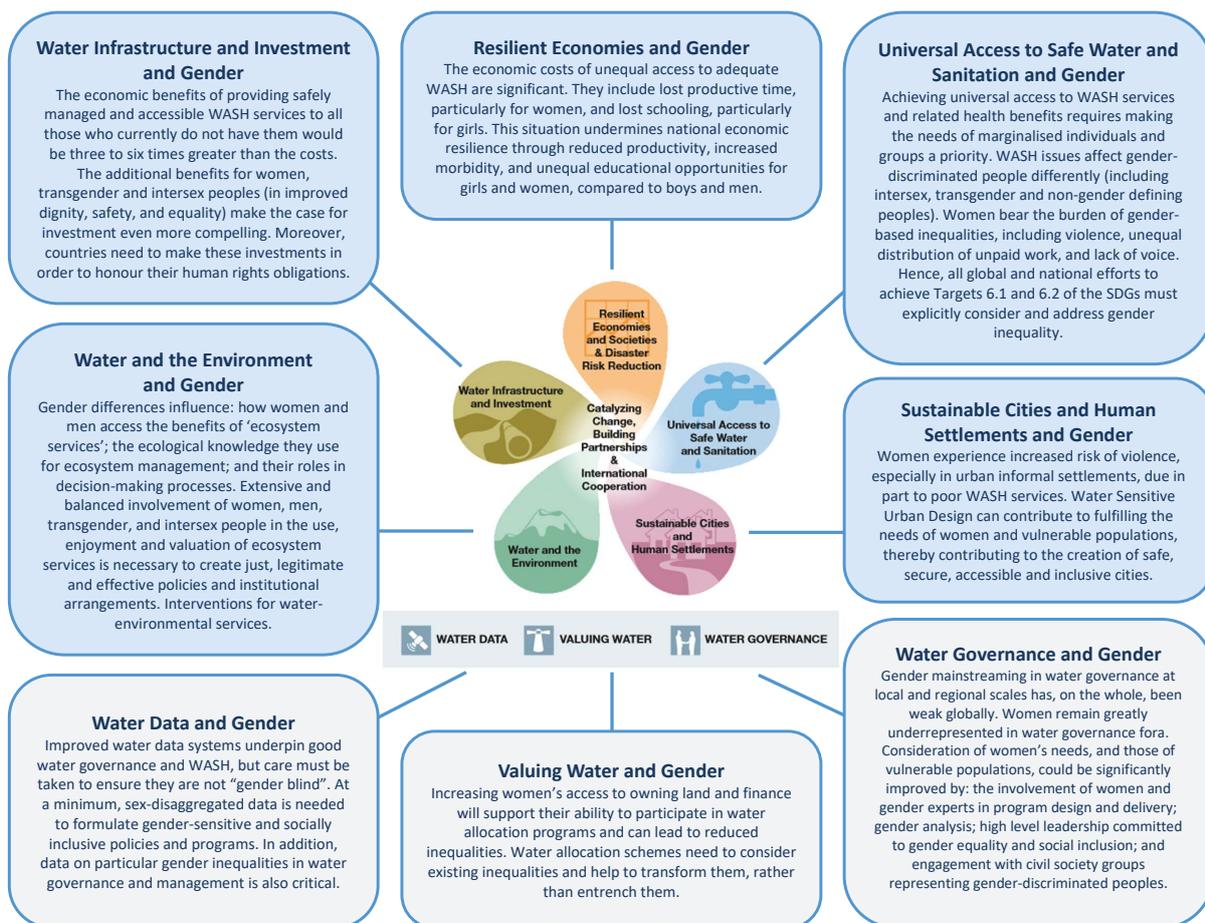
- **Proactive and deliberate participation of women and gender-discriminated peoples at all stages is needed:** Water governance and WASH issues affect gender-discriminated people differently, and these differences need to be identified and understood at all stages of WASH and water resource management. The best way to address the needs of women, men, transgender, and intersex people in all planned actions, including legislation, policies and programs, is to include them in decision-making, so that decisions about water resource management and access to WASH services promote social inclusion. Meaningful participation is required at micro (household and community); meso (local and provincial government); and macro (national, regional and global) levels.<sup>2</sup>
- **Integration across the SDGs leads to more equitable and sustainable outcomes:** The 17 SDGs call for an integrated approach to strategies, policies and implementation at the global and national levels. There is enormous potential in the WASH and water governance targets of Goal 6 (including domestic access to services, transboundary water management, reducing water pollution, increasing water efficiency and restoring water related ecosystems) to mutually reinforce positive outcomes of gender equality (Goal 5) and reduce inequality overall (Goal 10). Research demonstrates that projects designed and run to be socially inclusive and gender sensitive are more sustainable. Increasing gender-discriminated peoples’ voices at all levels (global, national, local) can help to achieve these integrated SDG targets, serving multiple goals simultaneously.<sup>3</sup>

- **Good data underpins good practice:** Improving water data systems underpins good water governance and WASH, but such systems ought not to be “gender blind”. Sex-disaggregated data can (at a minimum) contribute to gender-inclusive policy formulation. Data on gender inequalities in WASH and in water governance initiatives is also critical. For example, research and data collection can uncover barriers to women owning land and accessing finance, which may undermine their ability to participate in water allocation programs and integrated water resource management. Similarly, data on the economic and social consequences of women and girls lacking access to improved sanitation and menstrual hygiene facilities, underpins increased and targeted investment in these areas of need.

# Key Interlinkages between HLPW Action Plan and Gender Equality

There are five key areas of action in the agenda of the High-Level Panel for Water, and three underpinning priorities. Each of these has important gender equality dimensions (see Figure 1) and provides important opportunities to accelerate progress towards Goal 6, while advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment.

**Figure 1. Key intersection points: Gender and the HLPW Action Agenda**



# Current Landscape

## 1. **Water governance and gender**

*Gender mainstreaming in water governance at local and regional scales has, on the whole, been weak globally. Women remain greatly underrepresented in water governance fora. Consideration of women's needs, and those of vulnerable populations, could be significantly improved by: the involvement of women and gender experts in program design and delivery; gender analysis; high-level leadership committed to gender equality and social inclusion; and engagement with civil society groups representing gender-discriminated peoples.*

The foundational integrated water resource management “Dublin Principles” (1992) prioritise women’s roles in water management, and recognise that women play significant roles in managing water resources at the household and community levels, in farming, and in catchment management.<sup>4</sup> Yet women’s role in water governance has typically been hindered by gender-related and poverty-related barriers.

Despite this and other efforts in global forums, gender considerations have largely been seen as irrelevant or marginal in decisions about “big water” issues, such as: large-scale water supply options (dams, desalination, recycling schemes); catchment management; water allocations; and water trading. This may be attributed to reduced opportunities for women to meaningfully participate and have a voice in these domains, as well as a range of barriers to women’s opportunities in education (especially in engineering, law, government, and science) and women’s inferior access to resources, services and political influence. Women with disabilities can be doubly disadvantaged due to exclusion related both their gender and their disability.

Recent research has found that the most effective actions for achieving gender equality in water governance policies and programs are: engaging women and gender experts at all stages of a program’s development; strong leadership driving gender equality; and collaboration with women’s organisations.<sup>5</sup> Women’s organisations often have strong networks with communities, and by engaging these organisations, more women can be reached and benefit from project initiatives.

## 2. **Resilient economies, societies and disaster risk reduction and gender**

*The economic costs of unequal access to adequate WASH are significant. They include lost productive time, particularly for women, and lost schooling, particularly for girls. This situation undermines national economic resilience through reduced productivity, increased morbidity, and unequal educational opportunities for girls and women, compared to boys and men.*

Resilient economies are underpinned by safely managed WASH and water security. The economic benefits of providing universal access to basic water are between US\$54 billion to US\$66 billion per year, while the annual cost of providing basic water supply for an additional 2.3 billion people by 2030 (2015–2030) has recently been estimated to be approximately US\$ 14 billion.<sup>6</sup> The significant global economic gains therefore dwarf the costs.

Women’s economic resilience is undermined by the unpaid work they do to manage WASH services within the home, especially in relation to carrying water which can take over two hours a day.<sup>7</sup> Many rural women’s limited access to resources and opportunities (water, land and technology, education and skills, etc.), especially when coupled with climatic events (floods, droughts), can result in women experiencing a range of negative impacts leading to limited livelihoods, food insecurity and lower incomes.

Disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation investment decisions are improved when gender analysis is conducted and data is sex-disaggregated, in order to understand how investments impact on men and women differently. In addition, gender-sensitive participatory processes are required to ensure that all people's needs are heard and addressed equitably.

### **3. Universal access to safe water and sanitation and gender**

*Achieving universal access to WASH services and related health benefits requires making the needs of marginalised individuals and groups a priority. WASH issues affect gender-discriminated people differently (including intersex, transgender and non-gender defining peoples). Women bear the burden of gender-based inequalities, including violence, unequal distribution of unpaid work, and lack of voice. Hence, all global and national efforts to achieve Targets 6.1 and 6.2 of the SDGs must explicitly consider and address gender inequality.*

Practical gender needs are usually defined as the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society, but which do not challenge the gender division of labour and women's unequal position in society. A meta-analysis of household surveys across 45 developing countries found that 72% of daily household water-related tasks were done by women and girls.<sup>8</sup> Improved water provision and a more equal distribution of unpaid work between women and men would mean women have more opportunity to devote time to other aspects of life, such as livelihoods and education.

Improved access to WASH can impact women's health and social outcomes, including reducing risks of violence. A study found that improving public sanitation services in South Africa's townships could reduce sexual violence by up to 30%.<sup>9</sup> Increasing evidence is emerging that transgender and intersex people experience more harassment when appropriate toilet facilities are not available to them.<sup>10</sup>

Currently 38% of health care facilities in low and middle income countries have no access to safe water. Almost one in five countries lacks improved sanitation facilities and 35% lack facilities for hand hygiene.<sup>11</sup> Addressing WASH services at health centres improves the health of mothers and newborns by providing safe and dignified places to give birth. Availability of WASH facilities also supports improved and safe conditions of work for health workers, most of whom are women, thus contributing to gender equality.

Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is a key element of meeting women's and girls' WASH needs. Women and adolescent girls require access to appropriate information, affordable menstrual products, and private places to manage menstruation with access to water and soap and clean materials.

Challenging socially constructed gender stereotypes through WASH provides a pathway to shift social norms that are contributing to gender inequality. Since WASH issues are closely associated with women's traditional roles, WASH programs and policies can provide a forum to proactively promote women's voices, participation and leadership. Research into gender-sensitive WASH programs in Vanuatu and Fiji found positive outcomes went beyond 'practical' gains for women (i.e. improved access to services) and, indeed, led to improvements in women's confidence, voice and respect, positively affecting their power and status in the community.<sup>12</sup>

### **4. Sustainable cities and human settlements and gender**

*Women experience increased risk of violence, especially in urban informal settlements, due in part to poor WASH services. Water Sensitive Urban Design can contribute to fulfilling the needs of women and vulnerable populations, thereby contributing to the creation of safe, secure, accessible and inclusive cities.*

Human settlements need to be developed on an inclusive basis to cater for the diverse needs within a

given community, including women and people with disabilities. Among the urban poor, women tend to have the lower-paid, less-secure jobs. Men retain more of the decision-making power while having a smaller share of domestic tasks. This leaves women both cash and time-poor, and this has implications for the extent to which women can participate and have a voice in planning and designing urban spaces. Therefore, urban planning needs to consider these gender-based dynamics in order to cater for the needs and experiences of the whole community and to help narrow gender gaps.

Informal settlements characteristically have insecure dwellings and lack WASH services. Consequently, they present a range of health and safety challenges for their communities. Gender-discriminated people, including transgender and non-gender defining peoples, face additional dangers with respect to accessing toilets safely, carrying and managing water resources, and MHM in unsafe and unclean environments. In such contexts, research has demonstrated that inadequate access to WASH is linked to psychosocial stress, especially among women. This makes them more likely to encounter social and physical risks during their daily sanitation routines. In particular, issues of accessibility may impact on women with disabilities.

There are many opportunities for integrated water cycle management and water sensitive urban design to consider gender and social inclusion so that sustainable investments can be made that balance development objectives with environmental and social priorities.

## **5. Water and the environment and gender**

*Gender differences influence: how women and men access the benefits of 'ecosystem services'; the ecological knowledge they use for ecosystem management; and their roles in decision-making processes. Extensive and balanced involvement of women, men, transgender, and intersex people in the use, enjoyment and valuation of ecosystem services is necessary to create just, legitimate and effective policies and institutional arrangements.*

Female farmers, fishers and household water managers hold critical ecological knowledge, which can be used to advance wastewater systems in order to increase water security and safety. Women's active participation in decision-making processes is necessary to ensure that water resource management decisions are reflective of the whole community, and to ensure that effective and legitimate legal and institutional arrangements are put in place to manage water resources sustainably.

Water pollution may impact on men and women differently due to their different roles in agriculture, aquaculture and food, and in water security more generally. Additionally, women are in greatest physical contact with contaminated water and human waste due to their traditional cleaning roles within the home.<sup>13</sup> Adequate treatment of wastewater and other forms of pollution can therefore have flow-on benefits for health, poverty-reduction and increasing gender inequality.

## **6. Infrastructure, investments and gender**

*The economic benefits of providing safely managed and accessible WASH services to all those who currently do not have them would be three to six times greater than the costs. The additional benefits for women, transgender and intersex peoples (in improved dignity, safety, and equality) make the case for investment even more compelling. Moreover, countries need to make these investments in order to honour their human rights obligations.*

The up-front investment of WASH infrastructure yields significant social and economic benefits with impressive rates of return on investment of between US\$3 and \$6 gained annually for every dollar invested (global average).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, inclusive and gender sensitive infrastructure project design will

strengthen sustainability through improved accountability, greater responsiveness to the needs of end-users, and wider distribution of benefits. These benefits are in part realised through freeing up women's time to pursue other productive endeavours and through increased rates of usage by the wider population.

Life-cycle costing of infrastructure, financing decisions, tariffs and fees need to be established with consideration of the fact that many women and vulnerable groups may face financial constraints in part due to gender-related barriers to paid work and their relative lack of control over household finances. For example, pay-per-use toilets have been found to be a barrier for women more than men as a result of affordability issues.<sup>15</sup> Ways of addressing these constraints may include the implementation of pro-poor financing regimes such as subsidies, access to credit, and flexible payment mechanisms which mitigate barriers to paying for access to services.

There is a need for cost-benefit analyses to take account of the benefits to the community and to the economy of improved water and sanitation infrastructure, and of investments that focus on women and children.

## **7. Water data and gender**

*Improved water data systems underpin good water governance and WASH, but care must be taken to ensure they are not “gender blind”. At a minimum, sex-disaggregated data is needed to formulate gender-sensitive and socially inclusive policies and programs. In addition, data on particular gender inequalities in water governance and management is also critical.*

Data can be a tool for empowerment if it is disaggregated to identify where there are disparities between groups within communities. However, sex-disaggregated data on global access to WASH has never been reported in a consistent and comprehensive fashion. Monitoring progress towards the achievement of Goal 6 requires data disaggregated by sex and disability status, and sex-specific indicators and dedicated impact assessment methods to assess whether improvements in access to water benefit women and girls and narrow gender gaps. For water resource management Targets 6.3–6b<sup>16</sup>, the 2015 UNESCO ‘Sex-disaggregated indicators for water assessment monitoring and reporting’ tool is one such resource that may be used to guide this process.<sup>17</sup>

Addressing how women can participate in and influence water management decisions can increase the extent to which their expertise is utilised. The Asian Development Bank found that women are often excluded from water governance realms as a result of perceived deficiencies in their technical skills and experience; restricted career paths; lack of transparency around promotions and appointments; and informal male networks from which women are excluded.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, a study about female water professionals revealed that in South Asia the percentage of women in technical posts is only 5%, and almost all women interviewed felt that their skills were highly under-utilised.<sup>19</sup> Improved qualitative data on lessons learned on increasing gender balance in WASH and water resource management is therefore needed in order to inform evidence-based practice. Additionally, data on why exclusion occurs, and on the range of issues canvassed in this Framing Paper, is warranted.

As with all monitoring, evaluation and learning processes, how data is used is another critical part of the project management cycle, and in some contexts where large scale sex-disaggregated data is not likely in the short term, smaller data sets can be collected to highlight issues and inform practices.

## 8. Valuing water and gender

*Increasing women's access to owning land and finance will support their ability to participate in water allocation programs and can lead to reduced inequalities. Water allocation schemes need to consider existing inequalities and help to transform them, rather than entrench them.*

Valuing the social, environmental and economic benefits derived from water use can help policy makers to prioritise women's practical needs and improve their livelihoods, if women's voices are sought and included. Women contribute significantly to agriculture worldwide, and they comprise on average 43% of the agricultural labour force.<sup>20</sup> However, they are not equally represented in water governance decision-making forums.

The number of women responsible for farming and food production for the family is increasing as men from agricultural-based economies move to cities to find employment. This "feminisation" of agriculture results in additional farming responsibilities being placed upon women, who are already typically managing their families and caring for children.

Yet, the laws and/or customary practices of many countries still deny women an equal right to access land. This is compounded at the point of inheritance. Research has found that in 35 of 173 countries female surviving spouses do not have the same inheritance rights as their male counterparts.<sup>21</sup> As a consequence, women's economic opportunities overall are hindered, as well as their ability to use and manage water resources for small-scale farming and other agricultural activities.

Processes need to be put in place to empower women to participate in water allocation policies/schemes so that existing inequalities and discrimination are not perpetuated by water allocation, trading, or pricing policies.

## Action Plan

The High-Level Panel on Water can drive and galvanise integrated approaches to Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 6 (sustainable water and sanitation management for all) and Goal 10 (reduce inequality), and thus improve the sustainability and effectiveness of water governance and WASH investments, and contribute to gender equality. The Panel can do so through:

- **Amplifying and drawing on a diverse range of voices in decision-making forums** by proactively seeking the views of women and gender-discriminated peoples, providing meaningful platforms for them to offer input and influence.
- **Championing a transformative agenda for inclusive and gender-sensitive water resources management** and safely managed sanitation within the context of the Panel's Agenda for Action. This would involve gender considerations being incorporated in every initiative supported by the Panel.
- **Seeking commitment from national government stakeholders** to ensure that all water resources management and WASH investments **undertake gender analysis and planning from the outset** to inform program development. This will involve including female stakeholders as well as gender experts throughout the project cycle. Additionally, resources would be allocated to meet gender equality objectives within water management, and WASH policies and programs.
- Working to promote the use of **sex-disaggregated and disability-disaggregated data** to contribute to gender inclusive policy formulation and to help assess the impact and effectiveness of policies aimed at mainstreaming gender equality.
- **Working with multilateral development banks** (such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the African Development Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank) in line with their development financing roles, to support the **Panel's gender equality objectives**.
- Supporting the uptake and use of the **Human Right to Water and Sanitation Handbook** (including the checklist and other related resources) as a tool for sector specialists and policy makers and local governments to formulate and evaluate proposed investments and how they integrate social inclusion objectives, including advancing gender equality.

# Define Success: How the world would be different if the issues were properly addressed?

## Gender equality in water resource management, sanitation and hygiene



All global forums dedicated to water resource management and WASH will be socially inclusive and provide platforms for women and gender-discriminated peoples to provide input and influence.

Women will have access to land, water rights and finance at the same level as men.



Gender disparities in each cultural context will be revealed from the outset, and all decisions around water governance and WASH will be made to work through and beyond these constraints.

Women, particularly in developing contexts, will be taking up more places in the fields of engineering, government, law and science to support their engagement in the water and sanitation governance sectors.



All water governance and WASH programming will pay special attention to the most vulnerable people in our societies.



Women and gender-discriminated people will hold positions of leadership and power in water and sanitation focused organisations.

Women's organisations will be engaged and consulted.

Women and girls, boys and men will all be working together after a natural disaster, including those resulting from climate change.



Men will be champions of equality and involved in all levels of gender mainstreaming so that change is owned by men and women alike.

Women and children will no longer bear the burden of carrying heavy water from far away.



Women, children, transgender and intersex people will no longer be raped or suffer sexual harassment as they travel to the toilet outside of the home.

There will be fewer babies dying as a result of mothers giving birth in unhygienic environments.



Every girl and woman will have access to appropriate information about sexual and reproductive health and rights and appropriate menstrual hygiene management products and services.

## Key actors and activities

The burdens of water-related work carried out predominantly by women have been known for decades, which has led to a focus on women's practical (material) needs around water, especially in relation to carrying water and managing it within the home. More recently, there has been a recognition that while meeting women's material needs is necessary and critically important; it will not in itself lead to greater gender equality. Therefore, a focus on practical and *strategic needs* (increasing women's voice and influence) has become a priority for leading civil society organisations and research institutions working in this realm, including international non-government organisations (INGOs) such as **WaterAid, Plan International, Oxfam, the International Women's Development Agency, Institute for Sustainable Futures and Overseas Development Institute; and multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UN Women, the United Nations Development Program and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC).**

The **Women for Water Partnership (WfWP)** is a partnership of women's organisations and networks, uniting women in positions of leadership in around 100 predominantly low and middle-income countries. The 25 member organisations are active in the areas of WASH, sustainable development, women's participation and empowerment. WfWP emphasises the importance of linking the implementation of SDG 5 (achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls), with the implementation of SDG 6.

The **Global Water Partnership** has identified gender as a key cross cutting issue, and in 2014 it released its gender strategy addressing diversity and inclusion, social equity, and women's roles in the integrated and sustainable management of water resources.<sup>22</sup> The **Gender and Water Alliance (GWA)** was developed to promote women's and men's equitable access to, and management of, safe and adequate water for: domestic supply and sanitation; food security; and environmental sustainability.

In 2016 the **Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation**, Mr Léo Heller provided a report to the Human Rights Council's 33rd session on the role of gender equality in the realisation of the human right to water and sanitation. This report highlights areas that need particular attention in order to prevent and respond to gender inequalities in WASH, as well as gender-based violence and barriers to the realisation of the human right to water and sanitation.<sup>23</sup>

For a more comprehensive list of organisations and initiatives working at the global level to advance gender equality in WASH and water governance, please see Appendix 2 of the Discussion Paper, **'Gender and SDG 6: the Critical Connection' (2016).**<sup>24</sup>

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# Australia

water partners for development

*The Australian Water Partnership is an Australian Government aid initiative bringing together public and private organisations from the Australian water sector with development partners in the Asia-Pacific.*