ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS 5 AND 6

The case for gender-transformative water programmes

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As we approach the 10-year countdown to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is clear we are far from achieving SDG 5, on gender equality, and SDG 6, on universal access to water and sanitation. While gender equality and access to safe water and sanitation are often treated as separate issues, they are deeply linked and interdependent. To achieve both Goals, this briefing paper argues that the international community must adopt more gender-transformative approaches to water development, through: improved data collection at national and subnational levels; increasing opportunities for women's meaningful participation in water governance; and addressing gendered social norms – particularly around unpaid care work.

Cover photo: School girls in Tajikistan use their new handwashing station. Photo: Eleanor Farmer/Oxfam.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, we commemorate both International Women's Day and World Water Day. The year 2020 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration, and the ten-year anniversary of the General Assembly resolution 64/292, recognizing the human right to water and sanitation. This year, we also begin the 10-year countdown to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As we approach these milestones, it seems apt to take stock of the progress (or lack thereof) made on SDG 5 – gender equality and women and girls' empowerment, and SDG 6 – access to water and sanitation for all. While gender equality and the right to water and sanitation are intrinsically linked, we are far from achieving either of these goals.

Today, more than two billion people lack access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation services. An estimated 673 million people practice open defecation,[1] and data suggest that achieving universal access to even basic sanitation services by 2030 would require doubling the current annual rate of progress.[2] Water scarcity affects more than 40% of the global population and is projected to rise, with more than 1.7 billion people currently living in river basins where water use exceeds recharge.[3] With the impacts of climate change increasing, issues of water access and scarcity will worsen and disproportionately affect poor communities.[4]

At the same time, gender inequality persists as a result of unfair social norms, legal discrimination, women's under-representation in politics, and violence against women and girls. One in five women and girls aged 15–49 have reported experiencing sexual and/or physical violence by an intimate partner in the past year.[5] Women spend three times as much time as men on unpaid care and domestic work.[6] Globally, women's representation in national parliaments and elected local deliberative bodies averages only 24% and 26%, respectively.[7] At the current rate of progress, it will take 170 years before we achieve full economic gender equality.[8]

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are deeply relevant for women's and girls' empowerment, affecting their education, health, income and safety.[9] The 1992 Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development stated: 'Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water' and policies should 'address women's specific needs' and 'empower women to participate at all levels in water resources programmes, including decision-making and implementation, in ways defined by them'.[10] The 1995 Beijing Declaration also referenced gender equality in relation to water, stating 'inadequate access to safe water, sanitation facilities … all overburden women and their families and have a negative effect on their health'.[11] The Declaration calls for ensuring that 'women's priorities are included in public investment programmes for economic infrastructure, such as water and sanitation'.[12]

We know that women and girls – especially those living in poverty – are disproportionately affected by a lack of water and sanitation services, making SDG 5 and 6 fundamentally interdependent. Inadequate sanitation and hygiene put women's health and survival at risk during pregnancy and childbirth.[13] Girls may drop out of school or suffer psychological stress because of the lack of adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities in their communities.[14] In 8 out of 10 households without a water source on the premises, women and girls are responsible for water collection.[15] Globally, they spend an estimated 200 million hours collecting water every day.[16] In addition to placing them at risk of violence and harassment, spending time on water collection can prevent girls from

attending school and limits women's ability to engage in other productive activities.[17] Furthermore, despite being responsible for household water needs, women are often under-represented in water governance, including water user committees. As a result, development policies fail to recognize women as key stakeholders in water management and perpetuate cycles of gender inequality.[18]

The only explicit reference to women and girls under SDG 6 relates to sanitation and hygiene (Target 6.2) – but not to water access and management. Of the Voluntary National Reports submitted for the 2018 High-Level Political Forum, only five countries mentioned the interlinkages between water and women as priorities for achieving the SDGs.[19] The SDGs do not highlight the role of women in water beyond Targets 6.1 and 6.2, which only relate to water access, sanitation and hygiene – and not, for example, to water governance.[20] Indicators under SDG 6 mostly rely on data from water utilities and institutional records, which do not necessarily reflect quality or equity of services, or informal service delivery. In sum, the theoretical recognition that women and girls are key water and sanitation stakeholders has not translated to best practices on the ground. As Miletto et al. (2019) note: 'Despite the countless number of gender and inclusion strategies within the water management sector, a clear gap remains evident between policies and practice and, most importantly, on the ground, where progress remains limited.'[21]

Gender equality and access to water are basic human rights and are thus foundational for achieving the other SDGs. If we are to achieve these ambitious goals by 2030, leaving no one behind, we must promote more gender-transformative water and sanitation programmes. In particular, we must address the hidden causes of gender inequality, transforming power dynamics. This briefing note sets out three key policy recommendations to do so:

1. Increase the availability and quality of sex-disaggregated data on water, sanitation and hygiene, including water governance;

2. Increase women's leadership and meaningful participation in water governance and integrated water resources management (IWRM) at all levels (household, community, national, and transboundary);

3. Challenge social norms around unpaid care work, women's leadership, and gender-based violence.

This note highlights only some of the shortfalls in our approaches to achieving SDG 5 and 6. For example, it is also important to consider how age influences women's and girls' water and sanitation needs. In addition, with the increasing impacts of climate change, and as conflict over scarce water resources escalates, we must consider how women and girls will be affected differently – for example, whether such trends place them at greater risk of gender-based violence.

1   INCREASE THE AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY OF DATA AND INDICATORS ON GENDER AND WATER

At both the national and international levels, there is a lack of sex-disaggregated data on water and sanitation. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) noted that the 'unavailability of sex-disaggregated data' was one of the main reasons for the 'gap between policy commitments on water and gender and actual practice' (IFAD, 2007). As early as 1995, the Beijing Declaration called on international organizations, NGOs and the private sector to develop 'gender-sensitive databases, information and monitoring systems' on 'the impact on women of environmental and natural resource degradation, deriving from, inter alia, unsustainable production and consumption patterns, drought, poor quality water, global warming, desertification, sea-level rise […]'.[22]

According to a 2013 UN report, only 37% of countries produce sex-disaggregated data on access to clean water and sanitation – and around 45% produce none.[23] Only 13% of countries have a dedicated budget for collecting gender statistics. Notably, data collected on SDG Targets 6.1 and 6.2 (related to access to safe drinking water, hygiene and sanitation) are disaggregated by urban and rural populations and by socio-economic groups, but not by sex. This is especially surprising given that Target 6.2 ('End open defecation and provide access to sanitation and hygiene') calls for paying 'special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations'.

At the international level, there is no standardized or universal methodology for collecting sex-disaggregated data on water and sanitation, making it impossible to conduct cross-country analyses. Without such data, we cannot develop evidence-based water and sanitation policies to advance gender equality.[24] For example, the World Bank's Water Global Practice recently published a report highlighting that women make up less than 1 in 5 of the water workforce (in water utilities) and constitute only 23% of engineers and managers in the sector.[25] Such information can be used to advocate for stronger affirmative action policies to increase women's representation across the water sector.

In addition to sex-disaggregated data, it is essential to include water programme indicators reflecting women's access to resources, their decision-making power, and risk of violence. To this end, indicators must reflect not only service delivery and infrastructure, but also women's control and influence at household, community and national levels.[26] Luckily, there are tools to do this. The 2019 UNESCO WWAP Toolkit on Sex-disaggregated Water Data[27] includes more than 100 indicators on a wide range of gender-related water issues, and provides an internationally recognized methodology for the collection of sex-disaggregated water data, including household-level data.[28] The Toolkit has already been applied successfully in countries such as Namibia, Botswana, El Salvador and Honduras. National governments and water development practitioners can use this tool to build robust and comparable databases of gender-related water indicators.

The Household Water Insecurity Experiences Research Coordination Network (HWISE-RCN)[29] has also developed a monitoring tool to help understand the gendered impact of water insecurity at household level. HWISE-RCN argues that existing measures of water insecurity mask heterogeneity within populations (including gender) and fail to capture

the individual health, economic and psychosocial effects of water scarcity – which can be especially burdensome on women and girls.[30] The HWISE tool uses a scale measuring water access, availability, reliability and use. The tool can highlight how women experience water insecurity at the household level, while tracking how water development programmes affect their health and psychosocial well-being. However, it is important to note that respondents (both male and female) report on behalf of their households, which may limit our ability to distinguish individual female versus male experiences of water insecurity.

Increasing sex-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive indicators can uncover the underlying inequalities of the water and sanitation sector. By making the invisible visible, this information is critical for identifying gaps and advancing gender equality across sectors. Given the costly and technically complex processes of amending centralized data-gathering tools, this recommendation requires substantial investment by the international community.[31] SDG Target 17.18 calls for enhancing 'capacity-building support to developing countries to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data' disaggregated by sex, age, income, etc. UN Women's Making Every Woman and Girl Count initiative (2016–2020)[32] is an important step in this direction. However, ongoing support is required to carry these efforts forward, including regular follow-ups to track progress. Furthermore, funding for water development projects should be made conditional on commitments by recipients (whether national governments or other development actors) to collect relevant sex-disaggregated data and indicators.

2 ENHANCE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN WATER GOVERNANCE

Women's participation in water governance is essential for achieving SDGs 5 and 6, as it directly links to targets under both goals. SDG Target 5.5 ensures 'women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life'. Under SDG 6, Target 6b aims to 'support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management'. Similarly, Target 6.5a calls for the implementation of 'integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate'.[33] In addition to top-down efforts, development actors must support women's inclusion in water governance at community level by highlighting the benefits of their participation to relevant stakeholders, such as local organizations and private companies. Effective women's leadership is informed by their professional expertise and credibility.[34] As such, women must also be prioritized for receiving technical training in water and sanitation, which is usually geared towards men. This can indirectly support their participation in decision making and water governance.[35]

WOMEN, WATER GOVERNANCE AND IWRM

Integrated water resources management (IWRM) is a cross-sectoral policy and governance approach to maximize economic and social welfare, while protecting the sustainability of natural resources.[36] In 2018, the High-Level Panel on Water recommended strengthening water governance and ensuring that gender and social

inclusion were implemented alongside IWRM at local, national and transboundary levels.[37] With the impacts of climate change increasing, engaging women in IWRM is especially important.[38] Female farmers, fishers and household water managers can provide important ecological insight for water conservation and reuse.[39] Women's participation in IWRM is important for ensuring water decisions are reflective of the whole community, and to ensure effective legal and institutional measures exist to manage water resources sustainably.[40] Furthermore, we know that gender-inclusive peace negotiations are associated with more durable peace,[41] which suggests that women's involvement in transboundary IWRM could help mitigate water-related conflict – a growing risk of water scarcity.

Women's under-representation in IWRM has far-reaching consequences. As Fauconnier et al. (2018) note: 'There is a circular and self-reinforcing relationship between the constrained roles of women in governance and the under-valuation of their roles in production and resource use.'[42] To date, most countries have struggled to implement gender-inclusive IWRM at scale. Only 16% of national water plans mention women as key stakeholders or primary participants in climate adaptation.[43] In a 2013 survey of 65 countries, only 15% of countries had a gender policy in their water ministry, and only 35% of countries included gender considerations in their water policies and programmes. Furthermore, only 22% of surveyed water ministries had gender focal points.[44]

We must advance opportunities for women's participation in all levels of water governance, especially IWRM. In some contexts, introducing mandatory quotas on local water committees and national governing bodies is a necessary first step. Funding for water development programmes must be contingent on explicit commitments by governments and development actors to increase women's representation across all levels of water governance. However, simply increasing women's presence does not necessarily translate to meaningful participation and influence, and, as such, risks being tokenistic. We must therefore tackle discriminatory social norms, dismantling the underlying power inequalities between women and men. To this end, we must ensure women feel empowered to express their views openly, and men must understand the value of women's participation in water governance. Efforts to promote women's transformative leadership must therefore target both women and men to eliminate gendered social norms (see Recommendation 3). While there have been improvements in women's participation in water governance over recent years, the pace of change is far too slow to achieve SDGs 5 and 6. We must continue to advocate for women's representation in water governance – and make funding for water development conditional on it.

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Women's inclusion in IWRM and water governance can strengthen the social accountability of water and sanitation service providers. Oxfam's 'Tajikistan Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Improving Social Accountability' (TWISA) programme demonstrated this. Based on a human rights approach to development, the TWISA programme contributed to solving water-related issues at local and national levels by establishing service performance indicators and supporting citizen-led, gender-sensitive monitoring mechanisms. The project established Community Advisory Boards (CABs) to hold local water service providers accountable and set up complaint and feedback mechanisms. Women were encouraged to participate, and they received targeted trainings on their rights as consumers. While it was challenging to maintain equal levels of female and male participation, it was beneficial to have women leaders on

CABs as examples to other women in their communities, while encouraging them to use feedback mechanisms and demand their water rights.[45]

In Nepal, under the Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) programme,[46] Oxfam has promoted similar opportunities for women's leadership in water governance to increase social accountability. Oxfam in Nepal established Women Empowerment Centres (WECs), which host regular community meetings run by trained social mobilizers. The Centres aim to sensitize women on their rights around riverine water resources, and to involve them in transboundary water resources planning and decision making. WECs are registered with the government as official community forums, and advocate for key water governance issues – including identifying key social accountability stakeholders, such as service providers and local government. Between 2017 and 2018, 29 WECs were established across 4 of Nepal's districts. The WECs submitted more than 17 formal demands to local authorities around drinking water, water for irrigation, protection from floods, protection of riverine biodiversity, and river sand mining management. To ensure sustainability beyond the project phase, TROSA supports linkages between WECs and local enterprises and cooperatives to support future livelihood opportunities. The project also supports WEC members' participation in national- and regional-level governance platforms to build relationships with authorities.[47]

3 CHALLENGE GENDERED SOCIAL NORMS

Gendered social norms underpin the inequalities women and girls experience in relation to water and sanitation. Challenging these norms is key for achieving targets under SDGs 5 and 6. Gender-sensitive water and sanitation programmes have increasingly focused on issues of women's and girls' accessibility and security.[48] While these are highly important concerns, WASH programming often fails to tackle underlying power inequalities, and can thus perpetuate unequal gender norms. As Caroline Sweetman notes: 'examining WASH from a gender perspective involves extending the gaze beyond the important technical concerns of services and infrastructure to focus on social relations: in particular, thinking about power.'[49]

Gendered social norms in water and sanitation are particularly apparent when it comes to unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW). Oxfam research in poor communities in the Philippines, Uganda and Zimbabwe under the WE-Care programme[50] suggested that women spent 4.5–6.5 hours on care work in the previous day – which was three to six times longer than men.[51] The research also found that access to improved water sources was associated with a 1–4-hour reduction in daily unpaid care work.[52] However, improvements to infrastructure alone are not enough to challenge gendered social norms on unpaid care. For example, while installing water taps closer to women's homes can reduce the amount of time they need to travel to collect water, it does not shift the responsibility for water collection away from women – and the time saved may increase expectations on them to fulfil other domestic tasks. As such, it is important to challenge social norms by involving men and boys in UCDW so it is more equal. The WE-Care research found that external perceptions of acceptable male behaviour may influence whether men are willing to engage in UCDW. Surveyed men expressed fears of being mocked, disrespected or perceived as having reduced masculinity as reasons for not engaging in this work. This suggests the importance of understanding the barriers to men's engagement in unpaid care and domestic work, and of promoting wider social

acceptance of men assuming roles traditionally assigned to women. This can indirectly support women's participation in water governance. As O'Neil and Domingo note, women who are active in politics 'transgress ideas about what women should do', but 'so often do their parents and partner' – for example, when husbands take on domestic responsibilities.[53]

CONCLUSION

The SDGs have highlighted the links between complex inequalities and poverty.[54] At the current rate of progress, SDGs 5 and 6 will not be achieved in the remaining 10 years. Furthermore, as gender equality and access to WASH are fundamental basic human rights, it is imperative we meet these goals before we can achieve systemic change for women across the other SDGs. Leaving no one behind in water and sanitation demands a rights-based approach, which includes women's rights and gender justice as key intersecting components.[55] First, we must collect more gender-sensitive evidence-based data on water and sanitation and use this information to develop programmes and policies that meet women's and girls' needs. At the same time, we must advance women's leadership and redress power imbalances for meaningful participation in water governance and IWRM. Finally, we must actively challenge gendered social norms on unpaid care and domestic work through awareness raising and redistribute these activities to include men and boys. While national governments and development actors must be supported in these efforts, funding for water development programmes must be contingent on explicit commitments to advance gender equality. If we fail to prioritize transformative gender policies in the water sector, the SDG targets cannot be achieved.

NOTES

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