

Enhancing gender equality post-2015: The role of water and sanitation

WaterAid believes that access to water and sanitation is not only a fundamental human right, but is also key to improving gender equality. Access to water and sanitation and the fulfillment of these fundamental human rights is experienced differently by men and women. A lack of these basic services affects women and girls disproportionately by impacting on their health and dignity, contributing to their vulnerability to rape and violence, and thereby frustrating efforts to empower women to live healthy and economically productive lives.

Without access to sanitation and hygiene, women and girls are exposed to infections, a lack of dignity and a higher risk of maternal mortality. They often risk violence, sexual assault and other dangers when walking long distances for water, or when they can only defecate outside after dark. Women and girls perform most of the unpaid labour associated with water and sanitation, leaving them less time for education, economic activities and leisure. Girls frequently drop out of school when there are no suitable toilets, especially when they reach adolescence and have menstrual hygiene needs. This perpetuates gender inequality and women's poverty.

The 2012 *World development report on gender equality and development*¹ concludes that patterns of progress and persistence in gender equality matter, both for development outcomes and policy-making. Economic development is not enough to shrink all gender disparities; corrective policies that focus on persisting gender gaps are essential. A key recommendation from this World Bank report for reducing these disparities is to improve service delivery, especially for clean water, sanitation and maternal care.

Inequality: A concern at global, national and local levels

Inequalities are present in every country lacking access to safe water and sanitation. While the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have produced important gains for people around the world, improvements have often failed to reach those who are marginalised or discriminated against. The MDG drinking-water target is on-track globally but much of the developing world remains off-track, with growing disparities between regions. Progress on sanitation has been even slower; the provision of safe toilets has not kept pace with the increase in population. There are more people without access to sanitation in the world today than there were in 1990².

There are inequalities in water, sanitation and hygiene provision at national levels, where governments typically focus on those easiest to reach, and at local and household levels. Many patterns of discrimination, including those based on gender, age and disability status, are consistent around the world. Inequalities and disparities are structural factors which impact directly on development, so they cannot afford to be left out of a global framework³.

Addressing inequality post-2015: An opportunity to make things right

In the new development agenda, there is a chance to address persisting inequalities. Gender gaps are worst where girls and women face other disadvantages, and those disadvantages are worst when poverty combines with other forms of exclusion, such as remoteness, ethnicity, disability, chronic illness and aging.

Given the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and the corresponding inequalities, the post-2015 development framework should:

- Be both ambitious and relevant to least-developed and middle-income countries alike.
- Embrace the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination. This approach is supported by the work and recent report of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking-water³.
- Create targets that account for poor communities as well as poor countries, and that recognise inequalities and disparities within those communities and countries as well as across them.
- Go beyond addressing disparities in incomes to ensure access to safe water and sanitation for all. The framework should include a goal on achieving universal (100%) access to safe water and sanitation as a fundamental human right by 2030.
- Reflect the central importance of water, sanitation and hygiene to health, education, welfare, economic productivity, human rights and gender equality.
- Have water, sanitation and hygiene targets and indicators that focus explicitly on reducing inequalities by targeting poor and disadvantaged groups as a priority.

¹ World Bank (2012) *World development report on gender equality and development*

<http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/EXTWDRS/EXTWDR2012/0,,menuPK:7778074~pagePK:7778278~piPK:7778320~theSitePK:7778063~contentMDK:22851055,00.html>

² WaterAid (2011) *Off-track, off-target: Why investment in water, sanitation and hygiene is not reaching those who need it most.*

³ UN General Assembly 67th Session 2012, *Integrating non-discrimination and equality into the post-2015 development agenda for water, sanitation and hygiene*, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking-water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque