

Gender equality and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

“Lack of safe, private toilets make women and girls vulnerable to violence and sexual harassment. The lack of a toilet in a school can also prevent girls enrolling in education in some countries.”

Neven Mimica, European Commissioner for Development.¹



WaterAid/ Anil Cherukupalli

A new ambitious global sustainable development agenda

A new era has begun for sustainable development. It follows the adoption of a series of landmark international agreements including the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change. These agreements have fundamentally reframed the way in which the international community, including the European Union (EU), will work to achieve poverty eradication, inclusive growth and sustainable development.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embody core European values and interests covering economic, environmental and social pillars of sustainable development, with a strong focus on equality. The SDGs are indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable.

SDG 5, on gender equality and women’s empowerment, and SDG 6, focusing on sustainable water and sanitation for all by 2030, are inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing. Girls and women are disproportionately affected by a lack of access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for biological, cultural and social reasons. These both affect their unique WASH needs and pose specific gendered barriers, preventing them from accessing water and sanitation. Age, disability, gender and social status intersect to increase these barriers to WASH access.

Addressing WASH needs and barriers relating to women’s sexual and reproductive health, including menstrual hygiene and maternal and newborn health, should be particularly prioritised. However, these vital interlinkages are often overlooked or ignored by both WASH and gender policies and programmes. SDG 6 will only be achieved through a gendered and rights-based approach to WASH, while SDG 5 will only be achieved following the recognition and inclusion of the specific WASH needs and barriers that women and girls face.

The importance of WASH throughout a woman’s life

From the first moments after birth, both babies and mothers are susceptible to infection during the baby’s early stages. Every year 2.6 million babies still die in their first 28 days of life. Sepsis, the leading cause of infection in newborns, has long been associated with poor hygiene at birth.² It accounts for 16% of newborn deaths, claiming the lives of almost half a million newborns globally every year,³ and accounts for 11% of maternal deaths.⁴

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recently identified significant gaps in the provision of WASH in healthcare facilities in low- and middle-income countries. Provision of water was lowest in Africa, with 42% of all healthcare facilities lacking access to an improved source of water on-site or nearby, while 43% of healthcare facilities in the Americas lacked sanitation services.⁵ This has serious implications for interventions aimed at improving maternal and newborn survival, and negatively affects pregnant women’s decision on whether or not to give birth at healthcare facilities. Simple clean birth practices, including handwashing with soap for mothers and birth attendants in homes and health facilities, can help prevent this, increasing newborn survival rates by up to 44%⁶ and ensuring mothers survive to care for their babies. Access to safe drinking water, adequate sanitation and basic hygiene can help ensure children make it past the age of five years avoiding deadly diseases such as pneumonia and diarrhoeal diseases, which are strongly linked to poor sanitation and hygiene.

Girls and women spend a total of 16 million hours every day collecting water.

Household division of labour is very often gendered. In developing countries, women and girls are responsible for collecting water in nearly three quarters of households.⁷ WHO estimates that across 25 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa girls and women spend a total of 16 million hours every day collecting water, often in dangerous conditions.⁸ This huge unpaid domestic burden contributes to keeping girls out of school, severely limits women's time to engage in economic and social activities and impacts on the physical health of women and girls.

When girls reach puberty, access to a safe, private toilet and water both in the home and at school make a crucial difference to their life prospects. Because of widespread cultural taboos around menstruation, girls across the world report shame, fear and embarrassment linked to their periods.

In India, girls are typically absent for 20% of the school year because of menstruation, which is the second major reason, after household work, why girls miss school.

Girls may skip school or drop out altogether if they don't have access to adequate WASH facilities at school to enable them to manage their periods. In India, girls are typically absent for 20% of the school year because of menstruation, which is the second major reason, after household work, why girls miss school.⁹ Providing schools with water and separate latrines for boys and girls and promoting hygiene education in the classroom plays a vital role in helping to keep girls in school.

“If I had the choice, I would like water to be close by. I believe my life would be different, because the waterpoint would be so close and I would have time to go to school.”

Ze, 12, Madagascar.

Huge numbers of women live without the basic materials and facilities they need to manage their periods. In India, 70% of women surveyed said they could not afford sanitary napkins,¹⁰ and 88% of menstruating women said they use home-made alternatives, such as rags, dried leaves and newspapers.¹¹

Lack of access to private, safe and hygienic facilities for managing their menstruation in the workplace can also be a significant barrier to women's livelihoods. In Bangladesh, where 80% of factory workers are young women, a study¹² found that 60% of women were using dirty rags from the factory floor as menstrual cloths, leading to reproductive tract infections. This resulted in 73% of women missing work for an average of six days per month. Women had no safe place to purchase cloth or pads, or to change and dispose of them. When measures were introduced to change this, absenteeism dropped to 3%. Regrettably, most sanitation policies and programmes do not consider women's need to manage menstruation, latrine design usually does not address the specific needs of women and girls, and where hygiene

promotion programmes exist many exclude the issue of menstrual hygiene, focusing solely on handwashing.

Violence against women and girls can limit their access to water and toilets throughout their lives. Evidence from around the world shows women and girls have been subjected to abuse and sexual assaults either when covering long distances to fetch water or simply when looking for a private place to urinate and defecate around their homes or at school. This violence tends to increase in conflict or emergency contexts, especially when coupled with scarcity or large-scale displacement of populations.

As women get older, pregnancy-related conditions such as fistula, the onset of menopause, incontinence, and reduced mobility pose additional barriers for their access to water and sanitation. Different individual inequality factors including age, disability and social status also intersect to create greater disadvantage and limit women's and girls' access to WASH. HIV, for example, disproportionately affects women and girls, especially those who are marginalised or excluded. For women and girls living with HIV, gender inequality and discrimination on account of their HIV status can intersect, forming new barriers to WASH access.

How the EU can make a difference

With inadequate access to safe WASH, the living standards of women and girls in particular are impacted in different parts of their lives: education; health; nutrition; reproductive health; privacy and dignity; economic opportunities; safety and security; and personal development. In addition to being crucial for women's and girls' specific needs – such as menstrual hygiene management – to be met, WASH is also essential for their social and economic development, contributing towards gender equality and the realisation of their rights.

The EU is strongly committed to breaking the vicious cycle of gender discrimination towards the fulfilment of women's and girls' rights and gender equality. The EU's gender action plan for 2016–2020 clearly outlines how it plans to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment. Equitable access to WASH is identified as a core requirement within this (Box 1).¹³ This plan should be used as an example of good practice by the European Commission on integrating specific WASH indicators into gender plans, and should be replicated in future gender plans.

The EU is a global leader and donor on WASH. The EU currently invests US\$2.5 billion on water and sanitation each year, making it one of the world's largest donors to the sector. Yet, this only accounts for 3.5% of the EU institutions' total aid budget, and is significantly less than the allocation by some EU member states – for example the Czech Republic spends 10.1% of its ODA on WASH. The EU institutions and member states are thus strategically placed to ensure greater importance is given to gender equality and WASH and their interconnected nature for the achievement of Agenda 2030.

Box 1: WASH in the Gender Action Plan, 2016–2020.

Gender Action Plan objectives	WASH indicators
10. Equal access to quality preventive, curative and rehabilitative physical and mental healthcare services for girls and women.	10.3. % of beneficiaries using hospitals, health centres, and clinics providing basic drinking water, adequate sanitation and adequate hygiene (SDG 6.5).
13. Equal access for girls and women to all levels of quality education and vocational education and training free from discrimination.	13.5. % of pupils enrolled in primary and secondary schools providing drinking water, adequate sanitation, and adequate hygiene services (SDG 6.4).
16. Equal access and control over clean water, energy, transport infrastructure, and equitable engagement in their management, enjoyed by girls and women.	16.1. Proportion of population using an improved drinking water source (EURF Level 1). 16.3. % of population using safely managed water services, by urban/ rural (SDG 6.45). 16.4. % of population using safely managed sanitation services, by urban/ rural (SDG 6.46).

As the EU develops its implementation plan for Agenda 2030, it should ensure that targets under SDGs 5 and 6 on gender equality and universal access to water and sanitation are prioritised and fully integrated in EU policy and programming. WaterAid commends the European Commission on integrating key WASH targets and indicators within its Gender Action Plan for 2016–2020, but more needs to be done in order to meet the level of ambition of Agenda 2030. WASH must be integrated into all new policies, strategies and plans on gender equality with specific WASH targets and indicators, as demonstrated in the Gender Action Plan. Likewise, the EU must adopt a truly gendered and rights-based approach to WASH policy and programming. It is key that the European Commission recognises the integrated nature of WASH and gender particularly in light of the revision of the EU development policy, and the re-negotiation of the Cotonou Agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. The EU must also be prepared to scale up its financing for universal and equitable access to water and sanitation by allocating a greater proportion of its budget to WASH, in order to achieve SDG 6.

Key recommendations

European Commission

Continue to show political leadership:

- Continue to show political leadership on WASH and prioritise it within the EU's implementation plan for Agenda 2030 and partnership with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.
- Ensure EU external action supports partner countries to deliver and maintain equitable access to WASH by 2030 or their national target dates.
- Ensure the effective implementation of the Gender Action Plan 2016–2020, holding delegations and HQ staff to account on delivering progress across all its objectives, with special attention to WASH indicators.

Ensure adequate financing for WASH:

- Increase the proportion of the aid budget allocated to WASH by 1% every year to bring it in line with member state leaders (for example the Czech Republic allocates 10.1 %), targeting assistance to those countries most in need.
- Ensure the effective disbursement of the €3.1 billion pledge for nutrition-sensitive interventions by 2020 – with an adequate proportion being allocated to WASH, on the basis of countries' needs and priorities.

Strengthen policy:

- Ensure WASH is integrated into new policies, strategies and plans on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, with targets and indicators to incentivise progress and vice versa.
- Ensure institutional arrangements enable and enhance collaboration between teams, integration across thematic areas and support policy coherence for development as well as holding staff to account for the effective delivery of the Gender Action Plan.

EU delegations

- Ensure EU external assistance is integrated and coherent. All WASH programming should at minimum be gender-sensitive, while equitable access to WASH should be included as a core component of all programming on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.
- Ensure that progress against WASH indicators in the Gender Action Plan are measured and reported in every partner country in a timely and transparent manner.

European Parliament

- Ensure WASH is positioned as a core element in an integrated EU response to eradicating poverty, promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development including gender equality.
- Hold the European Commission to account for the effective implementation of the Gender Action Plan, ensuring that progress is being achieved through EU programming across all its objectives, with special attention to WASH indicators.
- Hold the European Commission to account on the effective disbursement of the €3.1 billion pledge for nutrition-sensitive interventions by 2020 – with an adequate proportion being allocated to WASH, on the basis of countries' needs and priorities.
- Protect the aid budget during the Multiannual Financial Framework mid-term review and ensure that WASH receives an adequate proportion based on partner needs and priorities.

Member states

- Progressively increase the proportion of national aid budgets allocated to WASH by 1% each year, bringing it in line with member state leaders (for example the Czech Republic).
- Fulfil the 0.7% GNI to ODA promise well in advance of the Agenda 2030 deadline.
- Ensure WASH is integrated into national international development policies, strategies and plans in all programming on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, with specific WASH targets and indicators.

References

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⁹ USAID, Kiawah Trust & dasra, 'Spot on: Improving Menstrual Health and Hygiene'. Accessed here: <https://www.dasra.org/cause/improving-menstrual-health-and-hygiene>

¹⁰ AC Nielson 'Sanitary Protection: Every Woman's Health Right' study quoted in <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/70-cant-afford-sanitary-napkins-reveals-study/articleshow/7344998.cms>

¹¹ USAID, Kiawah Trust & dasra, 'Spot on: Improving Menstrual Health and Hygiene'. Accessed here: <https://www.dasra.org/cause/improving-menstrual-health-and-hygiene>

¹² WaterAid 'We Can't Wait: A Report on Sanitation and Hygiene for Women and Girls' p.18.

¹³ European Commission: 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020'.