**Too Dirty, Too Little, Too Much:**

**The Global Water Crisis and Human Rights**

Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment

**UN Women Inputs**

**Examples of ways in which water pollution, water scarcity and floods are having adverse impacts on human rights.**

* + Water pollution, water scarcity and floods have disproportionate impact on women and girls which adversely affects the realization and enjoyment of their human rights including the right to health, water and sanitation, food, work and livelihoods and a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.
  + As water resources once held in common are increasingly enclosed, privatized or “grabbed” for commercial investment, local communities and indigenous peoples, particularly women, whose livelihoods depend on them, are marginalized and displaced. In this process, sustainable livelihoods, health, rights and dignity are jeopardized ([UN Women 2014](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2014/world-survey-on-the-role-of-women-in-development-2014-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3045)).
  + Women play key roles in generating change in the way water is used, shared, and allocated, from local to transnational levels and in spite of legal, regulatory and institutional frameworks that provide little space for their participation in planning and decision-making. There is a circular and reinforcing relationship between the constrained roles of women in governance and the under-valuation of their roles in production and resource use, the ensuing underappreciation of their knowledge about the resource, their constrained rights to access resources, which limits their economic opportunities as well as their representation of communities’ economic interests, thus perpetuating an under-recognition of their roles in productive activities ([IUCN 2018](https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2018-036-En.pdf)).
  + When safe drinking water is not available on household premises, the burden of water collection and treatment falls largely on the shoulders of women and girls. The lack of safe sanitation and hygiene facilities at home may expose them to illness, harassment and violence, hampering their ability to learn, earn an income, and move around freely. Where household members fall sick due to water-borne illnesses, it is mainly women and girls who provide the much-needed care ([UN Women 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/issue-brief-gender-responsive-water-and-sanitation-systems-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3915)).
  + The disproportionate responsibility women and girls bear as primary users, providers, and managers of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) at the household level is yet to be matched by a commensurate representation in WASH-related decision-making. While women’s participation in water governance and the promotion of safe sanitation has long been encouraged, this engagement has not always translated into better services for themselves, and decisions on “big water” issues—such as large-scale infrastructure investments, water allocations, or water trading—remain largely gender-blind ([UN Women 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/issue-brief-gender-responsive-water-and-sanitation-systems-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3915)).
  + Reducing the time spent on water collection and improving school sanitation is also important for achieving quality education and effective learning outcomes among girls (SDG 4). In Tanzania and Yemen, for example, a one-hour reduction in water collection time increases girls’ school enrolment by about 19% and 9% respectively. Where gender-responsive sanitation facilities are unavailable, girls may miss school or suffer psychosocial stress ([UN Women 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/issue-brief-gender-responsive-water-and-sanitation-systems-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3915)).
  + Among adult women, investments in water and sanitation can free up time and facilitate access to a wider range of employment opportunities, including in non-traditional sectors, potentially contributing to the realization of their right to work and rights as work as well as the achievement of decent work and poverty eradication (SDGs 1 and 8) ([UN Women 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/issue-brief-gender-responsive-water-and-sanitation-systems-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3915)).
  + **Safe sanitation is a gate-way service for the enjoyment of other human rights.** Pursuing the human right to sanitation and gender equality requires that policymakers and practitioners incorporate women’s voices and women’s unique needs in tracking progress towards this goal, project planning and infrastructure design, and in the creation of financing options and government partnerships ([UN Women 2016](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2016/towards-gender-equality-through-sanitation.pdf?la=en&vs=5952)).
  + There is a direct link between the rights afforded to women on access to resources, and the accepted roles of women in decision-making related to water. For example, traditionally in Bhutan the inheritance of **land rights** was accorded to daughters rather than to sons. Women there shouldered most of the agricultural work, including water management, and decision-making with respect to managing the river for agriculture in times of scarcity was mostly done by women. With some caveats, women’s voices are heard articulating their demands, and they appear to be almost as connected to the local level government functionaries as the men in this society ([IUCN 2018](https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2018-036-En.pdf)).
  + **Unequal inheritance rights** and customary practices that discriminate against women contribute to limited asset ownership, more unstable earnings and higher food and water insecurity ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/gender-climate-and-security)).

**How has climate change exacerbated water-related problems?**

*“We’re facing a systemic crisis. We can't separate the fact that we're living through a climate crisis from the fact that we are not legally able to decide about our own bodies, for example, with sexual health and reproductive rights. These things are connected. I really believe in climate justice, which is recognizing that the fight for social justice is not separate from the fight for environmental sustainability. It’s not a coincidence that the people who are the most marginalized—the most impoverished, rural indigenous women, for example—who live directly on the land and take care of families, are most impacted by natural disasters.”* – Majandra Rodriguez Acha, Generation Equality Youth Task Force; Co-Executive Director at FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund

* Climate change is a gendered issue which has exacerbated water-related challenges. Women women disproportionately suffer from the impacts of climate-related natural disasters, including flooding and have reported having to travel greater distances to secure water and to spend more time caring for ill people of all ages as a result of an increase in disease (including respiratory diseases, skin diseases and diseases such as the zika virus, chikungunya and dengue, caused by higher numbers of mosquitoes) ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/gender-climate-and-security)).
* Gender norms and power dynamics shape how women and men of different backgrounds experience or contribute to insecurity in a changing climate. For example, water scarcity can expose women to increased risk of gender-based violence; faltering livelihoods can contribute to men’s decisions to join armed groups and drought can shift pastoralist migration patterns causing families to split, increasing household burdens for women and infringing on the realization and enjoyment of their rights ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/gender-climate-and-security)).
* Women have always been at the forefront of movements demanding climate and environmental justice. Their lived realities demonstrate how drivers of the climate crisis also perpetuate systems of oppression that fuel economic, gender, and racial injustice.
* Gender inequalities in terms of access to finance, natural resources, technology, knowledge and mobility, among other productive assets, constrain women’s and girls’ ability to respond to and mitigate their disproportionate experience of climate change impacts. Gender inequalities, in turn, are further exacerbated by climate-related hazards, resulting in what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found to be “higher workloads, occupational hazards indoors and outdoors, psychological and emotional stress, and mortality” for women as compared to men ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/gender-climate-and-security) and [IUCN](https://www.iucn.org/resources/issues-briefs/gender-and-climate-change)).
* The continued marginalization of women in decision-making spheres further limits the agency and influence of women and girls and undermines the effectiveness of environmental actions by preventing the full breadth of participation needed to develop truly holistic and inclusive solutions. Excluding women from decision-making prevents effective, gender sensitive policy making and stops women from contributing their skills, knowledge and experiences, which could benefit entire communities. Evidence shows that women’s empowerment and leadership and advancing gender equality can deliver results across a variety of sectors, including food and economic security and health. It can also lead to more environmentally friendly decision making at household and national levels ([UN Women 2014](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2014/world-survey-on-the-role-of-women-in-development-2014-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3045)).

**To protect a wide range of human rights, what are the specific obligations of States and responsibilities of businesses in terms of addressing water pollution, water scarcity and floods?**

* The importance of involving both women and men in the management of water and sanitation has been recognized at the global level, starting from the 1977 United Nations Water Conference at Mar del Plata, the [International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin](http://www.wmo.int/pages/prog/hwrp/documents/english/icwedece.html) (January 1992), which explicitly recognizes the central role of women in the provision, management and safeguarding of water. Reference is also made to the involvement of women in water management in Agenda 21 (paragraph 18.70f), and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (paragraph 25) ([UN Water 2006](https://www.unwater.org/publications/gender-water-sanitation-policy-brief/).)).
* The full, effective and accelerated implementation of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf) and the fulfilment of the obligations under the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/) are mutually reinforcing in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and the realization of their human rights, and the report should call upon States that have not yet done so to consider ratifying or acceding to the Convention and the Optional Protocol.[[1]](#footnote-1)
  + The Convention sets out an agenda to end discrimination against women, and explicitly **references both water and sanitation** within its text.Article 14(2)(h)of CEDAW provides: “States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women inrural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural developmentand, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right: ... (h) To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing,sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communication”.
* States must ensure availability and sustainable management of water, as well as access to safe and affordable drinking water and adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all women and girls, as well as for menstrual hygiene management, including for hygiene facilities and services, in homes, schools, temporary shelters for refugees, migrants or people affected by natural disasters, humanitarian emergencies or armed conflict and post-conflict situations and in all other public and private spaces; take measures to reduce the time spent by women and girls on collecting household water; address the negative impact of inadequate and inequitable access to drinking water and to sanitation and energy services on the access of girls to education; and promote women’s full, effective and equal participation in decision-making on water and sanitation ([CSW 63 Agreed Conclusions](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/63/conclusions63-en-letter-final.pdf?la=en&vs=3258)).

**Specific examples of good practices in preventing, reducing, or eliminating water pollution, water scarcity and floods.**

* **Specific examples from a forthcoming (2021) UN Women UNIDO publication include:**
  + **Hydropower** as a renewable energy resource can be a boon for sustainable development, but if projects are not well-designed or managed can have negative impacts on local communities and the environment, including displacement, land dispossession, loss of livelihoods and environmental degradation, with detrimental consequences for women and girls ([UNEP 2016](https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/report/global-gender-and-environment-outlook-ggeo)). In Vietnam, the Trung Son Hydropower Project (TSHP) was designed with a strong gender action plan for the implementation of its large livelihood, minority and resettlement programme. The programme focused on five areas: (1) promoting gender equality in access to compensation under the resettlement plan; (2) strengthening the overall monitoring system of the livelihood improvement activities; and enhancing the capacities of TSHP staff on gender-aware data collection and reporting; (3) increasing rates of participation by women in livelihood activities; (4) reviewing training content and methods, and coaching district women’s union in their use; and (5) developing and successfully piloting cost-effective, appropriate, and innovative solutions to reach out to the most vulnerable ethnic Hmong populations and inform them about project impacts and compensation in their own language. ([World Bank 2017](http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/997951496156020605/pdf/115343-BRI-PUBLIC-TSHP-Social-Inclusion-Results-LJ-Final-rev02517e.pdf))
  + **Solar Water Pumping for Drinking and Irrigation in Mozambique** | In the village of Ndombe, the maintenance and repair of the photovoltaic (solar) water pumping system is managed by the community. Many women are involved in its maintenance and operation collect money from water users and are actively involved in community management. Benefits for women include the creation of productive activities, since the improved irrigation system allows women to sell vegetables and fruits and increase their income. The improved yield of crops also impacts diets, reducing malnutrition especially among women and children. Early results have shown an alleviation of women’s water-related drudgery through increased access to safe drinking water for more than 2,000 people in at least four communities. There are now new and better sources of livelihood for women in seven vulnerable communities through enhanced water supply for agricultural irrigation and livestock ([UNIDO](https://www.unido.org/sites/default/files/2016-01/FINAL_Gender_Energy_NEXUS_Brochure_27Jan_0.pdf)).
* **Good water governance will be a cornerstone of global water security over the coming decades.** A central dimension of water security involves the protection, allocation and sharing of increasingly scarce and polluted water resources among humans and the environment. Comprising approximately 50% of the population and despite their recognised pivotal role in water management since 1992 through the Dublin principles, women remain under-represented in water governance processes in local, national and transboundary settings. This is problematic not only from a human rights perspective, but also because governance processes are made more effective through inclusion of all stakeholders.
* Women are extremely active in water management through productive and conservation activities, on account of the de facto gender-based division of labour at the household level. However, it is water governance, representing the exercise of control, authority and voice or the ability to influence decision-making that presents important gender challenges. For example, [IUCN Environmental Gender Index (EGI)](https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/Rep-2013-008.pdf) from 2013 shows that Ministries of Water are the least likely to have a gender focal point.

**How do you ensure that the rights of environmentalists working on water issues (environmental human rights defenders) are protected?**

* Climate and water defenders, a large proportion of whom are women, risk their right to life and realization and enjoyment of their human rihgts. As climate change fuels renewed waves of environmental activism, global trends show that taking action to protect natural resources and defend environmental rights is becoming ever more dangerous. In 2018, 77 percent of human rights defenders who were murdered (and whose deaths were recorded) were defending land, indigenous peoples’ and/or environmental rights. An analysis of women land and environmental defenders by Global Witness notes that women activists face specific and unique risks, even though the majority of recorded murders are of men. In patriarchal societies, women activists are defending not only their environment, but their right to speak out. As women are often excluded from land ownership, natural resource governance and decision-making processes, this creates a context in which women’s voice and legitimacy is challenged from the onset. In some contexts, women are subjected to defamation and “smear campaigns” to further delegitimize their purpose. Women environmental defenders also face threats of sexual violence and rape, particularly in contexts where women stand up to extractive industries on indigenous lands. Many women also lose their lives to their cause. In 2016, the murder of famous indigenous environmental activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras sparked international attention. However, the killing of many more female activists goes largely unnoticed, and unrecorded ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/gender-climate-and-security)).
* States must support the important role of civil society actors in promoting and protecting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women; take steps to protect such actors, including women human rights defenders, and to integrate a gender perspective into the creation of a safe and enabling environment for the defence of human rights and to prevent violations and abuses against them, inter alia, threats, harassment and violence, in particular on issues relating to labour rights, the environment, land and natural resources; and combat impunity by taking steps to ensure that violations or abuses are promptly and impartially investigated and that those responsible are held accountable ([CSW 63 Agreed Conclusions para. ooo](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/63/conclusions63-en-letter-final.pdf?la=en&vs=3258))

**For businesses, what policies or practices are in place to ensure that activities, products, and services across the entire supply chain (extraction/sourcing, manufacturing, distribution, sale, and end-of life management) minimize water use and water pollution and meet human rights standards, especially those articulated in the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights?**

* The UN [Women’s Empowerment Principles](https://www.weps.org/) are a set of Principles offering guidance to business on how to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in the workplace, marketplace and community. Established by UN Global Compact and UN Women, the WEPs are informed by international labour and human rights standards and grounded in the recognition that businesses have a stake in, and a responsibility for, gender equality and women’s empowerment.

**UN Women Resources and Other References**

* [World Survey on the role of women in development: Gender equality and Sustainable Development](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2014/world-survey-on-the-role-of-women-in-development-2014-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3045) 2014 | UN Women
* [Towards Gender Equality through Sanitation Access](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2016/towards-gender-equality-through-sanitation.pdf?la=en&vs=5952) 2016 | UN Women
* [Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda: Gender-responsive water and sanitation systems](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/sdg-report) 2018 | UN Women
* [Gender, climate and security: Sustaining inclusive peace on the frontlines of climate change](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/gender-climate-and-security) 2020 | UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP
* [Women as change-makers in the governance of shared waters](https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2018-036-En.pdf) 2018 | IUCN
* [Gender, Water and Sanitation: A Policy Brief](https://www.unwater.org/publications/gender-water-sanitation-policy-brief/) 2006 | UN Water
* [The Rising Tide – A New Look at Water and Gender](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/27949/W17068.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y) 2017 | World Bank Group
* [Gender and Hydropower: Women’s Rights in the Development Discourse](http://www.csds-chula.org/publications/2017/10/2/gender-and-hydropower-womens-rights-in-the-development-discourse) 2017 | Center for Social Development Studies
* [Lessons learnt from gender impact assessments of hydropower projects in Laos and Vietnam](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552074.2017.1379777) 2017 | Journal of Gender and Development

1. United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 2131, No. 20378. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)