

## Gender, COVID-19 and water

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The World Health Organization estimates that 2.2 billion people do not have access to safely managed drinking water services<sup>i</sup>. This means as millions of people cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, they continue to lack access to clean water that is available from sources located on premises, free from contamination, and is available when needed. Water is vital to life and access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), is a basic human right shaped by sociocultural, economic, and environmental contexts. A rights-based approach to WASH demands that an inclusive, gendered lens is applied to all programming, design, and policy.

Every day, women and girls contend with traditional gender roles dictated by social norms. As a result of these prescribed roles, women and girls are most often responsible for managing household water and sanitation; they are also the primary caretakers for their families and sick relatives<sup>ii</sup>. A failure to understand the connection between gender, specifically women and girls, and water will lead to a failure in achieving universal access to clean water.

### The current state of gender and water

Gender matters when talking about water. Women and girls bear a disproportionate responsibility for collecting and managing household water and are the first to suffer when access to safe WASH is compromised. It has been reported that in sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls carry water containers on their heads, hips, or backs on average, five kilometers daily; this amounts to 40 billion hours per year spent on water collection<sup>iii</sup>.

As the primary water collectors, women and girls regularly have to navigate the risks of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Water collection sites often require walking long distances and can be in isolated areas, placing women and girls in vulnerable positions. Perpetually tasked with the physical demands of collecting water while also managing the threats of gender-based violence can significantly impact women and girls' mental health.

Women and girls are typically responsible for maintaining and cleaning sanitation facilities, which frequently places them at risk for exposure to viral and bacterial infections, particularly when clean water is inaccessible. In lesser-resourced settings, UNICEF reports that approximately 44 million pregnant women experience sanitation-related hookworm infections, burdening the health care system<sup>iv</sup>.



Despite this burden that ties women and girls to water, they are seldom entrusted with water management roles. A UN Water report noted that fewer than 50 countries have laws for rural sanitation or water resources management that specifically mentions women's participation<sup>iv</sup>.

Women and girls who experience disability, or who are displaced due to natural disasters or conflict, incur further challenges in accessing safely managed water, including:

- Individuals who have limited mobility may not be able to queue for water in displacement camps nor travel long distances to access clean drinking water.
- Crowded conditions and close proximity to males afford neither privacy nor hygienic facilities to safely and effectively manage menstrual hygiene needs.

### Water and COVID-19

Rather than confronting existing water-related inequities, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and exposed them as services to people in displacement camps, informal settlements, and lesser-resourced communities are increasingly threatened with water scarcity. Access to clean water supplies within these settings for hand hygiene, on-site sanitation, bathing, and laundry is a critical yet increasingly vulnerable component of the global pandemic response<sup>v</sup>.

### Primary Impacts

Gaps in the provision of water services, such as disruptions to safe water supply or increased costs driven by scarcity of supply, are notable consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>v</sup>. A 2020 WaterAid study surveyed practitioners across 14 countries in Africa and South Asia; 65% of respondents acknowledged that individuals lacked sufficient access to water to meet all of their daily needs during the pandemic<sup>vi</sup>. This same survey found that 61% of respondents reported an increase in the cost of water and soap, potentially jeopardizing a key WASH strategy for mitigating the impacts of COVID-19. These pricing issues can disproportionately affect women and girls by increasing their domestic workloads as they struggle to find different or cheaper water sources, which in turn further limits their access to education, income-generation, or leisure time.

## Secondary Impacts

Secondary impacts of the pandemic stem from tools designed to both control and manage the spread of COVID-19. While the intensity of the pandemic and local response varies, WASH access and services are frequently disrupted within both communities and households<sup>v</sup>. The failure to maintain WASH systems compromises water safety, curtails or abandons distribution of safe water, and contributes to the contamination of ground water through breakdowns in the sanitation infrastructure. These failures are dramatically compounded for women and girls and can lead to numerous challenges because:

- Already limited WASH resources, especially soap and water, are being reallocated. Women and girls are often last in a household to have access to water supplies.
- Restricted water availability or increased water costs can lead to an inability to safely and effectively manage menstruation<sup>vii</sup>.
- Social distancing requirements increase vulnerability to gender-based violence when collecting water or cleaning toilets.
- Unsafe water can increase the risk of infection for menstruators and pregnant women as well as increase potential for disease outbreaks.

Women and girls' unique positions as the primary collectors of water and their responsibility for many water-related tasks, leaves them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. COVID-19 has only elevated and aggravated this risk as females are:

- Forced to confront water scarcity by trading sex for water; or,
- Coerced into exchanging sex for water because they lack the financial means to pay for water access.

A July 2020 study in Kibera, Kenya found more than 4% of respondents acknowledged sexual exploitation in exchange for water access, though this number is likely much higher. Furthermore, over 67% described this as either "always" or "sometimes" occurring during water collection<sup>vii</sup>.

**"To advance gender equity, we must prioritize the most basic rights that are still denied to women and children. Let's start with the most fundamental of human needs - access to clean water and safe sanitation<sup>ii</sup>."**

## Conclusions

WASH strategies and programs are the cornerstone of an effective COVID-19 response and have the power to radically reduce the gendered inequalities associated with water collection and resource management. Rather than folding in opportunities to tackle this differential burden placed upon women and girls, the pandemic has continued to push these issues aside. A recent survey of over 1.2 million women and

children in 114 countries found that improved access to WASH was the second highest demand in maternal and reproductive care<sup>ix</sup>. The impact of water scarcity, price increases, diversion of WASH resources, sexual exploitation and abuse, and lack of women's voices in water management must be resolved in order to achieve not only transformative gender policies but also, those rooted in human rights.

**Authors:** Rachel Fisher Ingraham<sup>1</sup> and Karen Joe<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Independent Consultant, USA

<sup>2</sup> Knowledge and Research Advisor, Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology, Canada

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<sup>i</sup> World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who> (2019)

<sup>ii</sup> CNN <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/06/opinions/international-womens-day-water-and-sanitation-clark-chinchilla/index.html> (March 7, 2021)

<sup>iii</sup> WaterAid, [Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: A Pathway to Realizing Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls](#) (2017)

<sup>iv</sup> UN Water, <https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/gender/> (undated)

<sup>v</sup> UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/media/66416/file/WASH-COVID-19-monitoring-and-mitigating-secondary-impacts-2020.pdf> (March 2020)

<sup>vi</sup> WaterAid [The gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls](#) (January 18, 2021)

<sup>vii</sup> Sharma, B.B., Logie, C., Fisher Ingraham, R., & Joe, K. (2021). [Gender, COVID-19, and Menstrual Hygiene Management](#). The Gender and COVID-19 Working Group.

<sup>viii</sup> Global Waters <https://www.globalwaters.org/resources/blogs/protecting-and-empowering-women-and-girls-safer-access-water> (March 2, 2021)

<sup>ix</sup> White Ribbon Alliance, [https://www.whiteribbonalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Women-Want\\_Global-Results.pdf](https://www.whiteribbonalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Women-Want_Global-Results.pdf) (2021)