



Haja Jingeteh and her baby Yusufu Jingeteh, 2 months, washes clothes in a newly constructed WASH facility at the health centre in the village of Mongere, Bo District, Sierra Leone. *Photo by Sam Phelp/UNICEF.*

## Strengthening gender equality in access to water, sanitation and hygiene

This SWA Briefing Paper explores actions that can be taken by SWA partners that will improve gender equality in all aspects of their work.

### About the SWA Briefing Papers

The SWA Briefing Papers analyse key development issues that are relevant for the partnership, exploring how these issues can be better understood and proposing some concrete action that can be integrated into the collaborative work of SWA's partners.

Other Briefing Papers:

[Leaving No One Behind](#)

[Integrity, Accountability, and Transparency](#)

[Climate Change](#)

## Rationale

While there has been significant progress over the last few decades, gender inequality continues to be one of the most pervasive human rights violations throughout the world. Despite considerable attention and commitment, including through the SDGs' gender equality goal,<sup>1</sup> no country has yet successfully eliminated this form of discrimination.

As in all sectors, there are gender inequalities regarding access to water, sanitation and hygiene. These inequalities are a result both of social constructions of gender, which rely on harmful stereotypes about women's and girls' roles and responsibilities in the household and community, and of biological factors which only impact women and girls.<sup>2</sup>

Social constructions of gender often dictate women's domestic tasks, such as collecting water and caring for the family, as well as women's roles as community and health workers, where women comprise 70 per cent of the health workforce, while holding [only 25 per cent of senior roles](#). Social constructions also include the stereotypes of 'femininity', for example regarding the perceived need for female modesty, which can impact how and where women and girls are able to access sanitation.

Biological considerations include those related to menstruation, reproductive health and maternal needs, which means women and girls' needs are different to those of men but are often not taken into consideration in the design of water and sanitation facilities at home, in educational and health settings, and other public spaces. The social

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<sup>1</sup> SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'women and girls' in this Briefing Paper refers to all those who menstruate and give birth, including trans-men and other gender-queer identities.

constructions that stigmatize some aspects of women's health needs also lead to an unwillingness even to talk about women's health, let alone find solutions.

Water and sanitation form part of the basic services that all people require to enable them to exercise agency and live their lives with dignity, autonomy and health. Women and girls face systemic discrimination in most areas of their lives. A lack of water and sanitation is an additional layer that further hampers their ability to participate fully in their communities, attend school and work, and more broadly develop and pursue their life plans.

Eliminating inequalities in access to water and sanitation that are based on gender is critical to achieving universal access to these services – the central mission of SWA. Likewise, ensuring universal access to water and sanitation is a crucial element of the struggle for gender equality and social justice.

[According to research](#) from around the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has deepened gender inequalities in all sectors, including health, employment and access to water, sanitation and hygiene. In many countries, women are over-represented in low-wage and informal sector jobs, and it is these jobs that are particularly prone to disruption. This means that women are less likely to receive paid sick leave or family leave, and more likely not to have health insurance or social security. On top of this, schools and child-care closing have created additional burdens in the home, which are predominantly taken up by women. Such impacts from epidemics are not new phenomena; similar findings have been experienced during Ebola and other more localized health crises.

The SWA global multi-stakeholder partnership exists to mobilize its partners to work together more effectively to ensure water, sanitation and hygiene for all, always and everywhere. Gender equality is an indispensable part of our collective ambition.

SWA's High-Level Meetings are increasingly diverse, with women represented throughout the sessions whether giving keynotes or joining the panels. This follows a marked increase in the number of female ministers leading the water and sanitation sector in many of SWA's partner countries, reflecting progress in [closing some of the gaps among women in leadership](#). However, high-level representation is not everything. More can be done to prioritize gender in our work, including for example through commitments made under SWA's Mutual Accountability Mechanism, and by SWA partners pushing for greater female engagement in all aspects of their work.

As the partnership strengthens its country-level activities, the SWA Steering Committee and secretariat has received requests from partners for specific guidance on how to improve gender equality through the work that they are doing. This Briefing Paper aims to help fill that gap, offering SWA partners concrete suggestions on the steps they can take and approaches they can implement to contribute more deliberately and effectively towards dismantling gender inequalities. This Briefing Paper accompanies and complements the 2019 SWA Briefing Paper *Leaving No One Behind*, on the elimination of inequalities.

**What is gender?**  
(adapted from definition by UNAIDS)

Gender refers to a socially constructed set of norms, roles, behaviour, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men, and which are attached to masculinity and femininity, as well as to people identifying as transgender or gender-queer, or the expression of gender in various other forms.

The issue's intricacy expands with the understanding of diverse gender identities: a person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender that may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth. Gender-based prejudice includes any kind of stigma, discrimination or violence against somebody because of their gender, gender expression, gender identity or sexual orientation. Other important criteria for sociocultural gender analysis include class, race, poverty, ethnicity, disability and age. Gender inequality refers to unequal opportunities connected to gender, gender roles and expectation and gender expression to obtain and control social, economic and political resources, including protection under the law (such as health services, education and voting rights). Importantly, gender inequality often specifically determines differential, unequal and negative development and health outcomes for women and men and for girls and boys.

Throughout this Briefing Paper, we refer to 'women and girls', but other gender identities, including trans men and trans women, and other non-binary or gender-queer identities, can also experience exclusion and discrimination based on concepts of gender. This understanding of intersectionality helps to identify multi-dimensional inequalities and how different personal identities (gender, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, health status, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, and age, as well as political or other opinions) can affect access to rights, opportunities and services – including access to water and sanitation.

All people must be able to realize their human rights to water and sanitation, and denial of access arising from gender stereotyping is a human rights violation. Strategies and approaches for removing inequalities must be developed according to the different causes for discrimination.

## What does it mean to achieve gender equality?

### Gender equality and access to water and sanitation as reflected in the SDGs

The elimination of gender inequalities is central to the SDGs, with SDG 5 specifically committing to achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. [Gender equality is a key element](#) of every other SDG, and is reflected in [45 SDG targets and 54 SDG indicators](#). Therefore to ensure that the SDGs are met, women and girls must be able to engage and participate in decision-making and action.

SDG 6 on water and sanitation will only be met if, by 2030, all women and girls are able to access adequate water, sanitation and hygiene services, and these services are as essential for SDG 6 as for SDG 1 on poverty, SDG 2 on hunger, SDG 3 on health, and SDG 4 on education.

The targets under SDG 5 include aspects relevant for access to water and sanitation, including targets on reducing women's unrecognized and undervalued work.<sup>3</sup> The needs of women and girls are highlighted in SDG target 6.2, and are implicit in target 6.1.<sup>4</sup>

However, the relevant SDG indicators do not always adequately measure the gender aspects of the SDGs. For example, the indicator for SDG 6.2.1a on sanitation tracks the proportion of population that is using an improved sanitation facility but does not require information on who within the household has access - and we cannot assume that everyone has equal access within a household.

### **Gender inequalities in other sectors have an impact on access to water, sanitation and hygiene**

Though progress has been made in some areas of gender equality, the world is still far from achieving this collective goal. Women and girls are still disadvantaged in nearly every aspect of life. For example, women's educational outcomes still lag behind men's, with [higher rates of illiteracy](#) and higher rates of dropping out from school. There are also important disparities remaining in the subjects that women study compared to men, with fewer women pursuing courses of study in science and engineering – valuable subjects for careers in water and sanitation. When women do study or work in these fields, they often [experience discrimination and stigma](#). In some cases, this can be represented by a lack of the most basic of services at the workplace – [no female-designated toilets](#).

Women's health is not taken as seriously as men's, and many studies fail to recognize the biological differences that lead to different symptoms and outcomes for men [compared to women](#). Menstrual, reproductive and maternal health continue to be under-researched and undervalued, leading, for example, to a lack of adequate provision in public toilets for the management of menstruation.

Women continue to work more and [earn less than men](#), and as a result have [less financial independence](#). Even at the household level, decision-making is linked to purchasing power, and therefore to the priorities that men have. Data indicate that women are much more likely to want household latrines than men, and that using latrines is even considered emasculating in some cultures – but the [lack of purchasing power](#) denies women the power to make that decision. There continues to be legislation in some countries that limits women's access to land, to financing, to housing in comparison to men, and all of this has an impact; on access to water and sanitation, and on decision-making around access to water and sanitation. Women [are also less likely](#) to be in positions of power, or elected local and national government, which again has an impact on how policies relating to water and sanitation are developed and agreed.

There is also a proven gender digital divide, exacerbated by poverty, which limits women's and girls' access to information, financial services, health services, mobile

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<sup>3</sup> SDG 5.4: Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate. Indicator: 5.4.1: Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location.

<sup>4</sup> SDG 6.2: By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. SDG 6.1: By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.

payment systems, and more. [OECD data](#) indicates women globally are 26 per cent less likely than men to have a smartphone (70 per cent less likely in South Asia and 34 per cent less likely in Africa).

According to the most recent UN-Women's report, [Progress of the World's Women, 2019-2020](#), globally, women do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men. Living in a rural area, in a poor household, being married and having young children all [increase women's care workloads](#). This unpaid care work includes caring for relatives who are sick – often caused by a lack of access to adequate water and sanitation.

In Asia and the Pacific, women and girls spend up to [eleven times more time](#) on unpaid care and domestic work than men, and this includes the domestic use and management of water and sanitation. Men traditionally make decisions about water use more broadly – for agriculture, for industry – as well as where and how water is available for domestic use, without considering the very specific needs that a household has, as this is within a woman's 'remit', and therefore often perceived as irrelevant to men.

Climate change, and the necessary actions to combat the impacts of climate change, are critical to maintaining and building on the progress made in increasing access to water and sanitation. Evidence has shown that the more significant negative impacts of climate change are being felt (and will be increasingly felt in the future) by women, children, and marginalized and vulnerable people.<sup>5</sup> As SWA strengthens its response to climate change, the needs of women and girls must be put centre stage if we are to combat and manage the impact of climate change on water and sanitation.

Assuring universal access to water and sanitation is also important for addressing gender-based violence against women and girls. Women and girls report experiences or fear of physical, sexual and psychological violence when using shared toilets in communities and schools, or when they have no toilets at all and must relieve themselves outside. There is [also evidence](#) that young women are asked to pay for water or access to sanitation with sexual favours. Training in gender-based violence, latrine safety audits and other tools [can support actors](#) in identifying vulnerabilities to violence, and guard against potential negative consequences of dealing with such a sensitive and pervasive challenge.

Gender inequality is not inevitable – it is a product of choices and systems set up to disadvantage women. Differences in how men and women are treated are attributable to culturally and socially mandated stereotypical gender roles. These gender roles are intertwined with approaches which often claim gender 'neutrality', but which in practice fail to take account of women's and girls' biological needs – and therefore result in continued discrimination. All things 'feminine', whether socially constructed or biological, are undervalued. And this has a concrete impact in how policy decisions and distribution of resources are made.

Continued gender inequality maintains a system whereby the abilities, actions, desires and needs of women and girls are seen as less important or less valuable than those of men and boys. This has specific implications for policy decisions and resource distribution, including who is invited to, and who provides input to such decision-

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<sup>5</sup> UNDP Gender and Climate Change: Overview of linkages between gender and climate change, 2016.

making processes. Water and sanitation are no exception to these continued disparities. Gender inequality is a clear barrier to achieving water, sanitation and hygiene for all, always and everywhere.

Women, men, boys and girls should be able to determine their own lives, make decisions pertaining to their needs, and not be prevented or limited by stereotypes, norms, or culturally or socially set roles from realizing their potential. The obligation to eliminate discrimination based on sex is clear in international human rights law and includes obligations to address inequalities in the areas of water and sanitation. The [Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (CEDAW) is the international human rights treaty providing the framework for addressing discrimination based on sex, and it includes obligations to ensure access to water and sanitation.

### **Water and sanitation are indispensable for achieving gender equality**

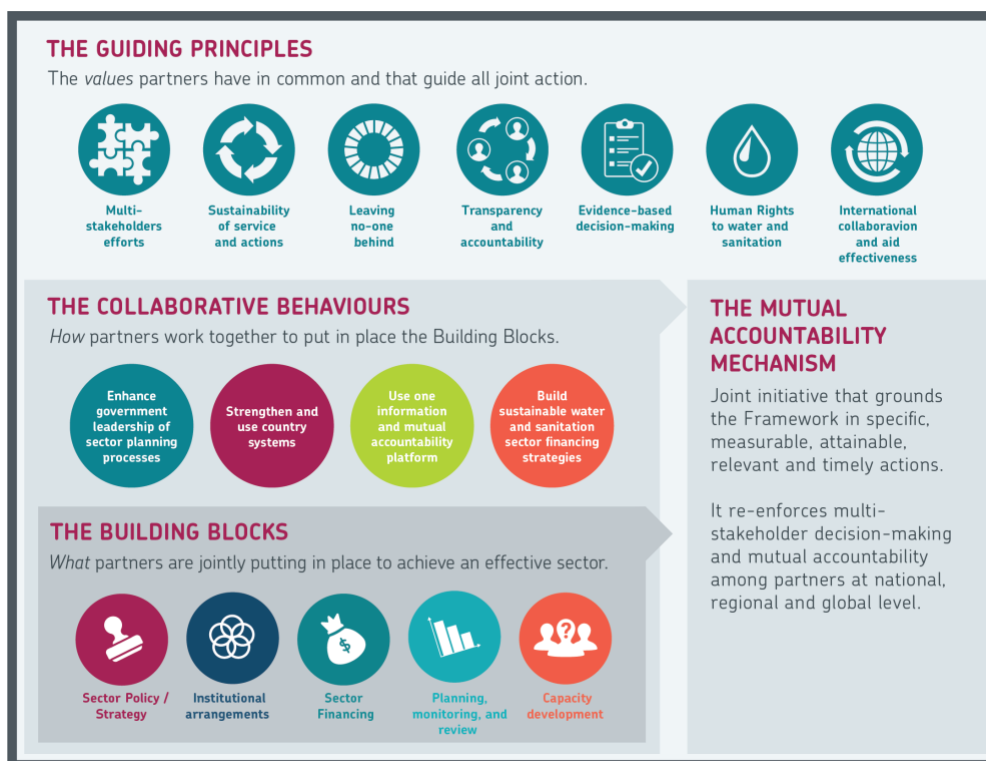
Achieving gender equality requires action beyond the water and sanitation sector – discrimination against women and girls permeates all aspects of their lives. However, without addressing gender disparities in water and sanitation, and the gendered impacts of lack of universal access to water and sanitation, broader efforts to achieve gender equality will not succeed. Securing universal access to water and sanitation is a prerequisite for greater gender equality, [allowing women and girls](#) to pursue their aspirations outside the home; to access resources and financial autonomy; to escape violence; to engage in decision-making processes; and to demand more equal division of labour within the home.

### **What is the role of SWA?**

As the focus of the SWA partnership's work is to support countries in reaching water, sanitation and hygiene-related targets of the SDGs, this must include ensuring that countries prioritize access to basic services over improving services for a few. To this end, SWA country partners can identify how to improve the lives of women and girls through better access to water, sanitation and hygiene, and show leadership by developing strong strategies for challenging gender norms, as well as supporting the leadership and empowerment of women. All the dimensions of limited access (availability, accessibility and affordability) should be taken into consideration while designing gender-aware policies.

## **Integrating gender into SWA's Framework**

The Sanitation and Water for All partnership developed the SWA Framework to catalyze effective multi-stakeholder collaboration in support of strong, resilient water and sanitation systems that can deliver lasting change. It can provide the basis for partners to take action to help confront the challenges of gender inequalities. The SWA Guiding Principles, Collaborative Behaviours and Building Blocks are useful for framing the conversation on gender and water, sanitation and hygiene. This is explored in the following section.



## The SWA Guiding Principles and gender



SWA's seven Guiding Principles are the values partners have in common and that guide all joint action.

### 1. Multi-stakeholder efforts

Good public policies can only be designed and adequately implemented if they are the product of multi-stakeholder efforts – bringing together governments, but also civil society organizations, the private sector, development partners and academic institutions. Within each of these stakeholder groups, the voices of women and girls must be heard and heeded. This may require setting quotas for female engagement in multi-stakeholder processes, and/or setting up dedicated spaces for listening to women's voices. The 2019 [What Women Want](#) campaign asked 1.2 million women worldwide what their priorities were. Access to water and sanitation came in second place, after respectful and dignified care.

It is important to identify barriers for women and girls to engage in decision-making processes to create appropriate solutions. For example, women may be prevented from participating in decision-making for cultural reasons, or it may simply be that women lack the necessary free time to join the necessary discussions.



SWA partners themselves may inadvertently discriminate against women and girls, which a gender audit would reveal. Civil society organizations that focus on and are led by women and other marginalized or at-risk communities can have a particularly important contribution to make – and yet they are often forgotten by the water and sanitation sector. Better collaboration increases the number of perspectives, and the likelihood of success.

## **2. Sustainability of services and actions**

Where services are inadequate or unsustainable the first affected will be the poorest or most vulnerable, as they will have the least ability to adapt when the necessity arises. Across the globe, women and girls continue to be over-represented in these groups.

Since women and girls are generally responsible for the management and use of water and sanitation in the home, sustainable water and sanitation services are essential to help lighten the load for them, and to avoid disparate, gendered impacts of lack of water and sanitation (for example in terms of care-giving responsibilities). The input of all service users is necessary to ensure sustainability and usability of services. Policies, institutions, financial planning and budgets must be created with the involvement of women and girls in order to ensure that services of all types are adequately and appropriately operated and maintained.

## **3. Eliminating inequalities to leave no-one behind**

In the context of gender, leaving no-one behind means working towards the elimination of gender inequalities. Improving the lives of women and girls and achieving gender equality requires that their distinct biological needs at different life stages are recognized and met, and that minimum standards of coverage, access, use and effectiveness of services is guaranteed. Ensuring a minimum basic level of access to services is a powerful and effective tool to eliminate inequalities, particularly gender inequalities, given the role and responsibilities of women and girls in most societies. Achieving gender equality requires that gender norms are challenged and replaced with positive norms.

Particular support is needed to support those countries and contexts that are most off-track for reaching the SDG targets. Many countries also have specific laws on gender equality that may not specifically address access to water and sanitation, but which may be harnessed and could have an impact on women's access to these services.

## **4. Transparency and accountability**

Transparency in all aspects of government, particularly in planning and budgeting processes, helps strengthen gender equality – particularly through improving accountability for all actors' adherence to plans and budgets. People who do not have adequate access to water and sanitation must be informed of plans to improve their services, and they must be able to turn to a complaints mechanism if the plans are not realized, or not suitable. Accountability is also a key tool for supporting people access their rights, as it helps governments become more responsive to disadvantaged and marginalized populations. Accountability also strengthens governments' capacity to create the right systems and institutions necessary for

service delivery, creating a clear route for gender equality to be embedded in national policy and programming.

## 5. Evidence-based decision-making

While it is important to follow evidence-based decision-making, it is also critical to ensure that evidence is not based on data that ignores gendered impacts.

Laws and policies are generally intended to be ‘gender neutral’, but they may often unintentionally have different outcomes for women compared to men, due to the roles that each play in society, their biological realities, and who controls the decision-making. For example, a policy that limits access to water in the home will have a more negative impact on women, as women are generally responsible for managing water in the home, whether for cooking, cleaning or caring. Likewise, a policy that builds toilets without adequate thought for requirements for managing menstruation will not meet the needs of women and girls.

To counteract this, there must be experiential learning and gender analysis on how policies impact on people’s access to water and sanitation, to ensure that policies work to achieve gender equality, and do not hinder it.

Governments also need to gather evidence to identify who is excluded from services and the reasons for their marginalization, in order to develop the best possible strategies to eliminate these inequalities. Ongoing data collection mechanisms such as the national census could be expanded to ensure gendered evidence is available.

## 6. Human rights to water and sanitation

Protecting the human rights of women and girls are central to the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation. Gender norms, grounded in discriminatory practices, place responsibility for management of water and sanitation in the home on women and girls. At the same time, women and girls are less likely to be included in decision-making related to water and sanitation. Ensuring equality in the enjoyment of the rights to water and sanitation also requires attention to women’s and girls’ biological differences, including in relation to menstruation and pregnancy.

Women and girls’ ability to realize other human rights is also impacted by the denial of the rights to water and sanitation, including in relation to health, housing, education and work. Realizing gender equality promotes all human rights.

Ensuring access to water and sanitation is an obligation articulated in the Convention on the [Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (CEDAW), and this obligation has been further elaborated in many declarations, commitments, and reports related to water and sanitation and gender equality.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water and sanitation has dedicated a specific report to the issue of [gender equality](#).

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Beijing Platform for Action (1995); Sustainable Development Goals, Goal 5; CEDAW General Recommendation 34 on the rights of rural women (2016); UN Women, Progress of the World’s Women 2015-16: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights.

## 7. International collaboration and aid effectiveness

Many international and regional agencies have specific gender policies that require the consideration of the needs and roles of women and girls and the advancement of gender equality in every aspect of their work. These policies are most effective when they are thoroughly integrated into water and sanitation policies, plans and programmes, rather than being an after-thought or add-on. International collaboration should also consider intersectionality and the range of women's experience in engaging in the WASH sector, whether as engineers, policy makers, service-providers – or as users.

### The SWA Building Blocks and gender



SWA's Building Blocks capture the **key elements** that the sector must have in place to be able to deliver sustainable services and progressively eliminate inequalities in access to water and sanitation.

#### 1. Sector policy / strategy

Policies and strategies should specifically consider how to address the needs and responsibilities of women and girls, including how to address their specific needs, such as menstrual and reproductive health and management. Policies and strategies must also be examined for unintended impacts that act against gender equality.

Implementation strategies must address gender inequality in an integrated manner.

#### Checklist

- a. Has your country ratified the Convention on Eliminating all forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN CEDAW)? Are there relevant regional instruments?
- b. Are there laws / policies / regulations in place that reflect the human rights to water and sanitation and prohibit discrimination against women? Are they enforced, monitored, and reported on publicly?
- c. Are targets set through inclusive processes?
- d. Are there specific targets for improving services for women, particularly those who belong to marginalized and disadvantaged groups, whether through occupation or other circumstance? Are they enforced, monitored, and reported on publicly?
- e. Does your government have menstrual health and hygiene policies?

## 2. Institutional arrangements

Systems and institutional arrangements for the delivery of water, sanitation and hygiene services must put women and girls at the centre to ensure that they fulfil their needs and address gender inequalities. Institutions [should also make sure](#) that women are represented within their workforce at all levels of operation. This could include establishing human resources departments, through certification and training policies that protect women's employment, and through encouraging the recruitment and professional advancement of women in the workplace.

Where consultations and multi-stakeholder platforms are planned, explicit efforts must be made to ensure women and female youth participation and engagement. If they are not adequately represented by existing partners within these platforms, expanding membership to include civil society organizations, networks and associations focused specifically on women or gender is advised.

Institutions must be assigned specific responsibilities with respect to delivering and monitoring services for women and girls who continue to have inadequate access to services.

### Checklist

- a. Do all relevant institutions explicitly work to include women and have an approach to enforcing this?
- b. Do institutions function transparently and in a participatory, non-discriminatory manner, making space for women's opinions and needs?
- c. Are women represented and participation in political and other processes?
- d. Are regulators able to monitor access to services disaggregated by gender and react accordingly?
- e. Do water and sanitation-related workplaces, such as utilities and other service providers, have policies in place to encourage women's participation in the workforce? Is funding available to enact these policies and are they being operationalized?
- f. Are there educational and training opportunities for women to facilitate their professional roles in institutions?
- g. Is data available to monitor female participation in the workforce?

## 3. Sector financing

The needs and challenges of women and girls must be central to all efforts to improve access to water and sanitation, and financing must reflect this. Where there are additional budgets available for reaching women and girls, these must be monitored, to ensure that they are spent as planned. Likewise, subsidy and benefits programmes must be tailored towards the needs of women and girls, and must also be monitored to ensure that they reach the intended recipients.

Affordability of services (including tariffs, but not limited to tariffs) must be carefully monitored and adjusted to reflect the financial challenges experienced by women and girls. Consideration should also be paid to limiting excessive taxing of menstrual products.

[Where financing is used](#) to promote and incentivize small and medium-sized enterprises, these should deliberately target and support women-led businesses and cooperatives.

#### Checklist

- a. Are there sufficient funds dedicated to promoting gender equality in access to water and sanitation?
- b. Do water and sanitation tariff structures and taxation policy make provision for affordability of services, particularly considering the position of women-headed households, as well as women's needs in terms of menstrual hygiene, and reproductive and maternal health?
- c. Are available budgets spent in a timely and transparent manner?
- d. Is financing available for training and capacity building for women and girls, who may not have had the opportunity to be active in the water and sanitation sector?
- e. Are there strategies in place to ensure that products for water, sanitation, hygiene and menstrual health are affordable?
- f. Are financial services, such as banking and credit, available to women and men equally, such as for opening water and sanitation enterprises?
- g. Has gender-responsive budgeting capacity of WASH government departments been developed?

#### 4. Planning, monitoring, and review

Monitoring and review of sector performance must include identification and monitoring of access to WASH, and the actions that the sector (including service providers) take in order to ensure that women and girls are able to access affordable and safe services.

Data must be disaggregated and analysed according to gender inequalities, bearing in mind that there may be compounding inequalities relating to disability, age, specific ethnic or indigenous groups, language, geographic location, occupation, and poverty.

#### Checklist

- a. Are planning and review processes participatory and multi-stakeholder and expressly accessible to marginalized or discriminated against women and girls?
- b. Are there adequate indicators and other tools to monitor gender equality?
- c. Is there an institution mandated to monitor gender inequality?
- d. Is relevant data disaggregated, accessible and made public?

#### 5. Capacity development

Women and girls are often excluded from training and educational opportunities in the water and sanitation sector due to gender norms, leading to significant gaps in knowledge and experience of women's lives. These norms, and the stigma attached to going outside cultural and social norms has a negative impact on everyone's lives, not just women and girls.

Ensuring an enabling environment for girls and women to study science, technology, mathematics and engineering courses (or other subjects typically dominated by male students) is important for building a reserve of qualified water, sanitation and hygiene professionals, addressing critical human resources gaps in the sector, and promoting women's economic empowerment. Encouraging women and girls to apply for training, and to providing a mentoring system to keep them in training and support them through their careers is critical for achieving a more equal workplace. Likewise, strong policies for parental leave that allow men and women to take leave equally is critical for changing attitudes towards women with children. Workplace facilities, such as female-friendly latrines and policies to support menstrual hygiene management, are also an essential consideration to make water and sanitation jobs more appealing to women.

### Checklist

- a. Are decision-makers aware of and educated in the importance of increasing women's participation in the workplace and in discussions for human and economic development?
- b. Are there public awareness campaigns on discriminatory practices against women and what can be done to address these? Are there quota to incentivize training and employment of women?
- c. Are civil society organizations engaged in advocating for the rights and accountability for women and girls?
- d. Are civil society organizations engaged in advocating for the rights and accountability for women and girls, and do they receive adequate funding?

## Collaborative Behaviours



SWA Collaborative Behaviours are how partners work together to put in place the Building Blocks.

### 1. Enhance government leadership of sector planning processes

Government leadership is essential to achieve gender equality, and governments should be striving for parity in representation. They must also include other stakeholders, who may have greater knowledge and experience in identifying gender inequalities – and how to address them.

Women and girls must be involved in the planning, implementation and review of water and sanitation policies to ensure that they are appropriate and relevant for the needs of all populations groups, particularly those who have been historically excluded. This may be through advisory sessions, or through national and local government working closely with NGOs, research institutions and other partners, to devise the most appropriate

policies and strategies to actively promote women's representation and leadership in government.

## **2. Strengthen and use country systems**

Many countries have created women's ministries, or national commissions on gender equality, which can work to provide information on gaps and challenges in ensuring equality for women and girls in water and sanitation. Such commissions and ministries must engage directly with the ministries responsible for water and sanitation, to ensure coordinated workstreams.

SWA partners (particularly CSOs) have an important role in ensuring that established water and sanitation systems and platforms (such as for sector coordination) are able to recognize and address the needs of women and girls.

Rural and informal urban areas may need more assistance in developing systems that recognize the needs of women and girls. For example, women will often have a far greater burden of care than men and are also likely to have a lower income than their male counterparts.

## **3. Use one information and mutual accountability platform**

Government should maintain an information platform on women's participation that is open, accessible and transparent and which all residents are able to comment on and challenge where necessary.

Women and girls must be able to engage with monitoring to ensure that the right indicators measuring access to water and sanitation by women and girls are in place. Women-led civil society organizations and other non-government actors must also have the opportunity of providing information and clarifying where data may be inaccurate or incomplete. This is essential for accountability processes to be effective, particularly when considering the impact of policies and programmes that intend to reduce gender inequalities.

## **4. Build sustainable water and sanitation sector financing strategies**

Financing must be provided for gender-aware and gender-sensitive programmes and projects. Any such budgets must be monitored, to ensure that they are spent as planned. Government investments, whether from loans, or grants or through public-private agreements, must contribute to increasing basic service coverage, and must include considerations of maintenance and operation.

Affordability of services (including tariffs, but not limited to tariffs) must be carefully monitored and cross-subsidies put in place for low-income households, which are more likely to be female-headed.

Transparency and predictability in financing strategies are essential for ensuring that women and girls are benefitting as planned.

## **Integrating action on gender equality into SWA's global and regional activities**

The partnership works at international, regional and at national levels, and SWA partners can adopt different actions at each level to achieve gender equality.

This will include integrating approaches and content to achieve gender equality into its webinars, high-level meetings, ministerial dialogues and sessions at international and regional conferences.

#### **a. SWA Mutual Accountability Mechanism**

The Mutual Accountability Mechanism supports SWA's partners to manage multi-stakeholder platforms, providing an opportunity for meaningful discussions on national priorities for achieving the SDGs. Gender equality in representation should also be as much a priority for the multi-stakeholder platform as prioritizing gender equality in access to water and sanitation services.

Commitments made under the SWA Mutual Accountability Mechanism can include considerations of achieving gender equality, through targeted funding as well as by identifying good practices for improving access to water and sanitation for women and girls.

#### **b. High-level Meetings**

SWA's High-level Meetings are a multi-stakeholder forum that enable ministerial and wider partnership dialogue, focusing on issues that will help partners achieve the water and sanitation targets of the SDGs. Strengthening partners' work, exchanging good practices and identifying bottlenecks with respect to gender equality must be integrated into all discussions at the High-level Meetings. SWA commits to achieving gender parity at High-level Meetings, as well as in the decision-making around such meetings.

#### **c. Knowledge management, webinars, and the SWA tools portal**

SWA has several different knowledge management tools, including webinars, and a tools portal, which allow partners to share information about progress towards the SDGs and the commitments they have made. The impacts of gender inequalities, and the action being taken by partners to address it are (and will continue to be) a critical part of this.

SWA can work with knowledge and network partners such as the Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN) to strengthen peer-to-peer learning between countries and organizations and for knowledge exchange on working towards gender equality.

#### **d. Steering Committee meetings**

SWA's global policy is directed by the Steering Committee, which can promote gender equality both in their own work, in its subsidiary bodies, and within SWA partner countries and organizations.

This may include, for example, the development of a dedicated SWA gender policy, or identifying focal points with a responsibility for mainstreaming gender-aware action throughout the partnership.

#### **e. UN processes and High-Level Political Forum**



SWA partners should work to strengthen the gender equality perspective of SWA partner governments' responses to United Nations processes, such as the High-Level Political Forum. There are also other dedicated UN agencies the partnership can learn from and work with on gender, such as UN-Women and other multi-stakeholder partnerships such as the Maternal Newborn and Child Health partnership.

### **Integrating 'Leave no-one behind' and the elimination of inequalities into national level activities**

SWA partners can all do more to enhance their inclusive policies and budgets in order to achieve gender equality.

Below are some approaches that SWA partners could consider:

1. *Participation*: Strengthen participatory approaches, specifically including women and girls in processes designed to plan for achieving the SDGs (for example, at multi-stakeholder planning and review platforms). Spaces for discussion dedicated to hearing and heeding women's voices can also support this. Ensuring the participation of women and girls, and particularly making space for traditional women's groups to engage, so that women are not isolated in otherwise all-male meetings. This is relevant for all SWA-led or SWA-promoted working groups, partnership meetings, and High-level Meetings.
2. *Evidence*: Carry out gender analysis to increase understanding of the barriers that women and girls face in their access to water, sanitation and hygiene and the impacts that any lack of access has on them.
3. *Monitoring*: Develop indicators to monitor disparities and progress in women and girls' access to water and sanitation, as well as gendered impacts of lack of water and sanitation. For example, monitoring how often women miss work due to caring responsibilities that arise from water-related illness. Disaggregation by wealth, disability, ethnic/religious/social, geographical location would help increase understanding of the intersectional challenges in access to water and sanitation.
4. *Access to information*: Ensure access to information on special measures to be applied for women and girls, using the channels women and girls use to obtain information. This might be through health workers or other community workers, and ensuring information is not just conveyed in written form, in order to reach women who are illiterate.
5. *Policy, strategy, and planning*: Encourage all SWA country partners to include specific policies, standards and targets for achieving gender equality.
6. *Accountability*: SWA partners collaborate to integrate gender considerations into commitments for the Mutual Accountability Mechanism.
7. *Financing*: Creating specific budget lines that are used to improve access to water, sanitation and hygiene services for women and girls, addressing the specific challenges experienced by them. Any such budget lines must be monitored to ensure that they are spent as intended.

8. *Visibility*: Providing arguments for water and sanitation to be prominent in every broader policy and strategy that targets women and girls – across all sectors, including health, education and poverty elimination.

## Conclusion

Achieving water, sanitation and hygiene services for all, always and everywhere, requires the prioritization and fast-tracking of actions that address the rights, needs and priorities of women and girls.

Specific, proactive efforts must be made to engage with women and girls, to make sure that they are included and prioritized at the earliest opportunity in developing legislation, policies, plans and programming.

This requires that all actors acknowledge and address discriminatory practices that may be long-standing and entrenched within societies and organizations. It will also require rethinking current investments in water, sanitation and hygiene services to ensure that women's and girls' needs are met. With the right investments, women and girls are then better able to engage in education, the workplace, and their communities, and ultimately move us all closer to gender equality.

Achieving the SDGs will rely on inclusive policies that consider the needs of women and girls. Policies that empower women and girls enable them to be key actors of change – both in the management and in the design of water, sanitation and hygiene services. Without a significant shift, the gender inequality that jeopardizes the SDGs, and blights so many lives, will continue to have a negative effect on us all.

## Resources

[Sustainable Development Goals, Goal 5](#) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

[UN Women, Progress of the World's Women 2015-16](#): Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights.

[Violence, gender and WASH toolkit, WaterAid.](#)

[Gender equality in the 2030 agenda](#): Gender-responsive water and sanitation systems, UN Women Issue brief.

[UN Special Rapporteur's thematic report to the Human Rights Council on gender equality](#), 2016, A/HRC/33/49.

[Gender and rural water services – lessons from RWSN members.](#)

[A Guide to Gender-Analysis Frameworks](#), March, Candida, Smyth, Ines and Mukhopadhyay, Maitrayee, 1999 Oxfam GB and Practical Action Publishing.

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