

# Water, Women & Wisdom



A Companion Document to

## Water & Sanitation:

A People's Guide to SDG 6  
A rights-based approach to implementation

“That’s our responsibility, our role, and our duty, to pass on the knowledge and understanding of water, to all people, not just Anishinabe people, but people of all colors.” — Grandmother Josephine Mandamin (Anishinabe)

Women have a strong and distinct physical and spiritual relationship with water and have traditionally been tasked with caring for it, as water provides us with our first environment in the womb and sustains all life. In most societies, women are the inheritors of water knowledge, protection, and management. However, efforts geared towards improving the management of the world’s finite water resources often overlook the central role of women in water sustainability. In order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, it is critical to address the intersection between SDGs 5 & 6 to ensure both the realization of the human right to water and sanitation for all and the empowerment of all women and girls.

### Education & Economic Dimensions

In many parts of the world, women and girls bear the primary responsibility for domestic tasks, including water collection, often at the expense of education, income-generating activities, cultural and political involvement, rest and recreation. Women and girls are also predominantly tasked with caring for family members who have become ill due to unsafe water and sanitation. There is little recognition of the burden women bear as water managers, cleaners and caretakers, and this gendered work is unremunerated.

Taboos, stigmas, and lack of adequate sanitation facilities in schools, markets and workplaces often leads girls and women to avoid them during menstruation, to the detriment of their education, economic participation and income generation.

Lack of land ownership remains an underlying cause of women’s limited access to water. Even where women do have a legal right to land, customs often prevent them from taking de-facto control of land and natural resources. Extractive industries and infrastructure megaprojects also have negative economic effects, as women are often not consulted when companies negotiate access to land, compensation or benefits. Female mine workers also often face discrimination, poor working conditions and unequal pay for equal work.

Water is increasingly impacted by policies determined by international financial and trade institutions (the World Bank, IMF and WTO), including privatization, which affect women’s decision-making and vital role in water management. Women are often marginalized in monetary economy, and thus suffer when a price is put on water. As most of the world’s poor, women are significantly affected when water is privatized.

To achieve SDGs 1.4, 4.5, 4A, 5.4, 5.5, 5A, and 6, it is essential to recognize and value the contribution of women and girls to water management, and enable them to fully participate in education, land ownership, and political and economic decision-making.

### Health

Our planet’s water is becoming increasingly hazardous. People are reliant on water that has been rendered non-potable due to climate crises and all types of waste made from human activity, including from nuclear energy and extractive industries.

Illnesses related to lack of clean water and sanitation, are the fifth leading cause of death for women, globally. Contaminated water has serious health impacts on women and children, especially pregnant women and their unborn or young children. There needs to be serious consideration of the mutagenic effects of some water contaminants and their damage to our world’s future citizens. In order to achieve SDG 3, especially target 3.3, which makes specific reference to water-borne diseases, and targets 3.1 and 3.2 which refer to maternal mortality and deaths of children under five years of age, women need safe access to clean water.

Health issues are also closely linked with the heavy burdens of water collection and other water-related house chores that contribute to physical ailments and the expenditure of precious calories and energy, further adding to women’s and girls’ nutritional deficits.

The lack of safe access to sanitation facilities hinder girls and women’s ability to manage their menstruation with dignity and hygienically, making this monthly occurrence an additional health and hygiene challenge. Cultural taboos for menstruating girls and women in some societies limit their access to soap and water, causing additional hygiene and sanitation problems. Finally, gender-based violence causes long-lasting physical and mental health impact, leading to death. The lack of services and justice raises a heavy toll on girls and women around the world. SDGs 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 are vital to women’s and girls’ right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and to their empowerment under SDG 5.

## Gender-Based Violence

Gendered division of labor along with limited access to water result in increased risks of gender-based violence. Women and girls face increased risk of physical and sexual violence and harassment when collecting water from long distances in many parts of the world. Water inaccessibility may facilitate domestic violence, as women have reported being subject to beatings if they take too long to gather water or request their husbands to help with water collection.

Additionally, in places with limited or no access to toilets, women and girls face an impossible choice of either openly defecating or traveling long distances to access toilets, both of which make them vulnerable to sexual assault and harassment. Women and girls needing to do so at night are at an increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence. SDG 6.2 calls to “end open defecation” while “paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.” An end to open defecation would help to reduce gender-based violence, as called for in SDG 5.2.

This violence is further compounded by the lack of support and protection for victims of gender-based violence, with many not reporting for lack of mechanisms to do so or fear of reprisal, furthering impeding SDG 5.

As for women human and environmental rights defenders, including those who defend and fight for the right to water, they face gender-based violence as a direct result of their activism. In addition to facing threats of physical violence, harassment, unfair trials, etc. that male human rights defenders face, women activists are also confronted with sexual violence, harassment, and domestic violence. Women’s families may also be targeted in an attempt to intimidate women human rights defenders.

## The Way Forward

Women and girls, especially rural and indigenous women, have knowledge and experience that is critical for the achievement of SDG 6, and as such need to play a central role in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water. A gender-sensitive approach to SDG 6 would not only contribute to women’s and girls’ enjoyment of their human rights to water and sanitation, but also contribute to their economic and political empowerment, improve opportunities for girls to go to school, and reduce gender-based violence and the gendered impacts of illnesses and food insecurity.

## Recommendations to States and Stakeholders

Actions aimed at mainstreaming gender in water and sanitation for the full implementation of SDG 5 and SDG 6 include:

- Enabling the participation and leadership of women in decision-making processes about water and sanitation, for example, by integrating them in capacity-building opportunities;
- Recognizing women’s unpaid work and their role in water management and agriculture, assisting them in gaining access to water for productive uses, and according women equal land rights;
- Developing policies and programs and mobilizing public resources to improve safe access to clean water and sanitation, considering the needs of women and girls in policy design, implementation and evaluation;
- Developing or strengthening existing protection mechanisms and programs for women human rights defenders;
- Ensuring the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is implemented in processes leading up to decision-making, to ensure water protection and train policy makers and other decision-makers on how to dialogue with various knowledge systems, especially indigenous ways of learning, so as to ensure more integrated and comprehensive understanding of policy impacts

## Food Security & Agriculture

Water sustains our environment and supports livelihoods. Water crises, brought on by pollution and contamination of oceans and water sources, and climate change impacts, including drought, soil salinization, and ocean acidification, disproportionately impact women through food production and water collection for use in household. Agriculture accounts for 70% of water use, and women account for 43% of the agricultural labor force, many working on small holding farms, which feed two-thirds of the world population.

Women often lack access to and control over water and other productive resources, assets, services and opportunities for ensuring food and nutrition security. This, in turn, limits the efficiency of the agricultural sector to deliver food security for all. Women farmers do not have ready access to water rights for irrigation, affecting their production output. They carry out unpaid water collection while men have control over cash crops. Due to unequal access to irrigation, women farmers depend mostly on rain-fed agriculture. Extreme droughts cause harvest failures, which result an increase in food insecurity.

In the division of labor, women and girls are saddled with gendered work as growers and processors of food, responsible for feeding the family and collecting water. Although women carry out most of the water-related tasks, play a key role in food production, especially in subsistence farming, and perform most of the unpaid care work, structures of governance and leadership exclude women from policy making and management in the water and agricultural sectors.

Gender equality and women’s empowerment, water, and food security must be strongly interlinked in the goals that will cover each of these areas, especially SDGs 2.3, 2.4, 5.5, 5A and 6.4.



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