

Ensuring Women and Girls' Rights to Water and Sanitation Post-2015

Access to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation is a universal right and central to human wellbeing and development. Yet ensuring this right for all, particularly women and girls who are often systematically excluded, will require international efforts to move beyond the current Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of halving the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Water and sanitation must be placed at the heart of a post 2015 development framework, and much greater emphasis placed on issues of equity, discrimination, sustainability, politics and local knowledge.

Why universal access matters

Water and sanitation are essential to human wellbeing and broader development progress. A post 2015 framework must recognise this and promote universal access as a central ambition. The wider benefits for women and girls of having access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities are significant. These include a reduction in the occurrences of illness during pregnancy and childbirth, and instances of child and maternal mortality. Safe access can also reduce women and girls' exposure to violence and rape, and improve their overall life chances as a result of better educational and economic opportunities.

Progress so far

Some progress has been made, and the MDG target of halving the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water was met in March 2012. Yet, due to the narrow conceptualisation of the water and sanitation MDG targets many critical issues remain ignored. Currently over 2.5 billion people still live without access to improved sanitation facilities and nearly 800 million people receive drinking water from inadequate sources. Many poor women and girls still have to walk long distances to collect water. Their health, and the health of their families, is compromised by using water from less clean sources. They also continue to find themselves at risk of sexual harassment and gender violence as a result of a lack of adequate sanitation facilities.

Barriers to access for women and girls

The following challenges continue to present barriers to women and girls enjoying their basic human rights to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities.

1 Poor integration

There remain several conventional sectoral barriers between water and sanitation as well as between the domestic and productive uses of water. Future action needs to take poor people's multiple needs as a starting point for providing integrated services and also create a more bottom-up and joined up approach to address all the MDGs.

2 Poor data

Poor data has limited progress towards realising universal access for disadvantaged groups including women and girls. Progress against the current goals and targets has been measured by averages. The data does not provide a more comprehensive picture of regional variations and differences between gender and socio-economic groups. It also does not include statistics from rapidly growing peri- urban and slum areas.

3 Unequal land rights

Globally, women only own two per cent of land and land ownership is often a precondition for accessing water. Access to water for irrigation and productive use is an important way of addressing gender inequality and poverty. Yet the irrigation sector continues to be dominated by men. ➤

4 Exclusion from the design and implementation of water and sanitation projects

Cultural norms in many communities mean that women and girls continue to bear the burden of water collection responsibilities. It is estimated that in 25 countries, women and girls spend a combined total of at least 16 million hours each day collecting drinking water. Yet, despite their local knowledge and expertise, women continue to be excluded from the design and implementation of water and sanitation projects. Gender biases mean that women are often designated cleaning, maintenance and collection tasks but fail to be included in the management of domestic and productive water and sanitation services.

5 Uneven power relations at the household level

Unequal relationships at the household level mean that women are often unable to make important decisions about purchasing water. This can put them in a position where they are forced to use cheaper or free untreated sources of water which are further away and more likely to result in health problems, increased poverty or destitution. Women's disproportionate responsibility for household water, sanitation and fuel supply also means that they are more vulnerable to environmental risks, especially in slum areas often located near polluting industries, rubbish tips or in flood prone areas.

Policy recommendations

To help ensure women and girls' rights to water and sanitation, accelerate broader development progress and tackle exclusion head-on global action needs to focus on rights, sustainability, justice and inclusion. A new framework should:

- Promote the universal rights to access to water, sanitation and hygiene as a central ambition, and critical to the achievement of all other development goals.
- Articulate a definition of the rights to WASH services based on poor people's multiple household and livelihood needs.
- Support an integrated approach to meeting the water and sanitation needs of the poorest and most marginalised people that is locally owned, designed and implemented. Appropriate targets and indicators should be included within a stand-alone goal as well as across other relevant goals.
- Incorporate a set of indicators that will accurately monitor progress on water and sanitation in terms of gender, age, health-status, disability, sustainability, equity and regional variations.
- Tackle gender and cultural biases at all levels in public, economic and political life to help ensure that women have a genuine role in the formulation and implementation of local water and sanitation policies and services. Indicators and targets for equal land and water rights, gender quotas in key decision-making structures and awareness-raising and gender sensitisation programmes for both women and men must be clearly defined across a new framework.

Further reading

Mehta, L. (2013) Ensuring rights to water and sanitation for women and girls. Paper written for interactive expert panel, *Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for Women and Girls*, that took place at the 57th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

Nicol, A.; Mehta, L. and Alilouche, J (2012) "Some for all rather than more for some?" Contested pathways and politics since the 1990 New Delhi Statement', *IDS Bulletin* 33.1

Joint Monitoring Progress (JMP) Report on water and sanitation *JMP Report Progress on Sanitation and Drinking Water (2012 Update)*
<http://www.ussinfo.org/documentslinks/documents/>

National stakeholder consultations on water: supporting the post-2015 development agenda (2013)
<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/node/349243>

Credits

This *IDS Policy Briefing* was written by **Hannah Corbett** and **Lyla Mehta** and is based on a longer paper written by Lyla Mehta for the 57th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 'Ensuring rights to water and sanitation for women and girls'.

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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE UK
T +44 (0) 1273 606261 F +44 (0) 1273 621202 E ids@ids.ac.uk W www.ids.ac.uk
[Twitter: @IDS_UK](https://twitter.com/IDS_UK) #idspolicy [Facebook: /facebook.com/idsuk](https://facebook.com/idsuk)