

Water for All People

Equal Rights and Opportunities

The United Nations World Water Development Report 2026

Executive summary

Access to safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation services, and to adequate water supplies for various other purposes, is essential for the fulfilment of the most basic needs and fundamental aspirations of all human beings. When access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services is lacking, women and girls often disproportionately bear the responsibility for providing water to households.

Women are generally under-represented in the governance and management of water supplies, including financing and water-related infrastructure development. This can hinder their access to water resources and the equal sharing of benefits, threatening their health, livelihoods and food security.

Gender equality constitutes an essential path towards fair and just access to, and use of, water

Titled *Water for All People: Equal Rights and Opportunities*, this report provides a comprehensive, evidence-based summary of the linkages between, and progress towards, water and gender equality. It describes how normative and policy frameworks translate into problem analysis, programme design principles and strategic action implementation in the water domain. Understood as the equal enjoyment of rights, responsibilities and opportunities for all people, regardless of their sex and/or gender, gender equality constitutes an essential path towards fair and just access to, and use of, water.

Drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in human settlements

As of 2024, 2.1 billion people still lacked safely managed drinking water while 3.4 billion people still lacked safely managed sanitation services and 1.7 billion lacked basic hygiene services at home.

Women and girls are most likely to be responsible for water collection, thus exposing them to safety risks, especially in remote or insecure areas. Carrying water can cause physical strain and injury, and women and girls may be confronted with gender-based violence. Lack of privacy and safety because of poor sanitation facilities also disproportionately affects women and girls. When water is unsafe or unreliable, the unpaid daily labour of managing, rationing and prioritizing water use, as well as the labour of caregiving, can lead to illness in the household.

The human rights to water and sanitation entitle all people to access to safe and clean drinking water and adequate sanitation, provided equally and without discrimination. Fulfilment of these rights requires that all obstacles in access to safe drinking water and sanitation are removed, particularly for the most marginalized populations. This includes removal of impediments to equal participation of men and women in water governance.

However, gender disparities in women's access, participation and leadership remain high, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Gender inequalities in WASH services occur as part of a pattern of other inequalities and discriminatory social practices.

Secure land tenure and housing rights are often a prerequisite for accessing municipal water and sanitation services. Poor housing quality, insecure land tenure and housing discrimination can disproportionately affect women. With legal ownership or recognized tenure, residents are in a position to demand better services, including water and sanitation.

Access to safe WASH in schools contributes to positive health, improved school attendance and, ultimately, better educational outcomes. In health care facilities, sex-separated and well-maintained toilets should be available for staff and patients, and should include facilities for menstrual hygiene management.

Gender inequalities in WASH services occur as part of a pattern of other inequalities and discriminatory social practices

The WASH community has often called for ‘low-cost’ solutions without investigating the household’s ability to pay, the opportunity cost of such payments or who pays. It is likely that some of these WASH approaches are low cost in part because the labour associated with their application and maintenance goes unpaid.

Alleviating gendered inequalities in WASH calls for interventions that go beyond technical fixes to those that address structural and social inequalities. Examples demonstrate that when women’s participation is designed to encourage leadership and voice, as opposed to merely checking boxes, women are active agents of change for gender equality and WASH equity.

Food and agriculture

Access to and management of water in agriculture can be highly gendered. Due to customary norms and legal frameworks in land and water tenure, women in rural areas may face greater obstacles to accessing and controlling water for irrigation, livestock, aquaculture and domestic use compared to men. Even when women are involved in water management in agriculture, their role is often not recognized, limiting their power-sharing and economic potential.

Women’s water tenure security can improve when interventions adopt gender-transformative approaches to challenge patriarchal values. However, formal ownership of land and water resources does not guarantee control, especially when use rights (access and withdrawal) are distinct from control rights (management, exclusion and alienation).

Gender inequalities in access to land and management of water resources in agriculture can negatively affect girls’ access to education, women’s livelihoods and empowerment, and household health and nutrition. These inequalities exacerbate women’s exposure to food insecurity.

Outmigration is reshaping gender roles in agriculture. In many countries, there has been a rise in female-headed households because of male migration. The impact of migration on women’s decision-making in agricultural production, control over income, group membership and workload depends on factors such as household land ownership, women’s position within the household and whether the household receives remittances.

Improving women's access to irrigation may provide benefits that go beyond enhancing agricultural production. Irrigation technologies can reduce labour and time burdens. When designed as multiple-use water services, they can support domestic and other productive needs as well. The promotion of collective action by strengthening women's groups and grass-roots organizations can amplify these gains.

Industry, business and energy

The water sector is struggling to attract, train and retain human resources in many parts of the world, including women's participation in management and leadership positions. While some water utilities have close to 40% of women employees, there are some entities and locations with no female staff. It is possible to progress towards achieving gender equality in WASH sector employment, particularly in positions such as community sanitation and health work.

Access to energy is essential for water use in domestic and agricultural settings, especially where water pumping is required. While women have traditionally operated manual pumps, the shift to fuel- and solar-powered systems offers time-saving benefits.

WASH in workplaces is known to improve workforce productivity and health. However, sanitary facilities are still not always provided separately for men and women; often they are not fit for the specific needs of women, including menstruating, pregnant and lactating women. Several countries and organizations have adopted guidelines for the number of toilets for workers, differentiating requirements for men and women, although such guidelines may be more difficult to implement in smaller enterprises.

Business and industry can promote gender equality in water use by championing policies and practices rooted in sustainability, equity and inclusivity. Companies can also initiate training, promote women's leadership and invest in community water infrastructure. As part of corporate social responsibility, industry could fund initiatives that support women's access to water, education and livelihoods. This might include scholarships for women studying water management or investing in women-led water-based enterprises.

WASH in workplaces is known to improve workforce productivity and health

Gender audits can be effective tools for systematically evaluating the extent to which gender equality is embedded within organizations, programmes and sectors, including in industry, business and energy. These audits examine policies, workplace practices and leadership structures to identify inequities that may limit women's participation or where they may benefit from opportunities and resources.

Climate change and hydrometeorological disasters

Climate change is posing more threats to human well-being, through its impact on water and food security, public health, economic stability and the environment. Intensified occurrence and magnitude of hydrometeorological hazards highlights the urgent need for adaptive, resilient and integrated approaches to disaster risk management (DRM) strategies.

Gender is a key structural determinant of disaster vulnerability. Improvement of development outcomes can depend on integration of gender considerations into disaster resilience efforts.

Hydrometeorological disasters can disproportionately affect women, girls and gender-diverse people due to systemic inequalities in access to resources, decision-making and services. Women may particularly face heightened risks to their livelihoods, rights, safety and health (especially menstrual health and hygiene). Hydrometeorological services, such as early warning systems, that are sensitive to disparities, responsive in intervention and inclusive in representation can help to ensure people of all genders are engaged, protected and empowered.

Although gender mainstreaming and DRM are broadly endorsed and there is now greater awareness of gender-related considerations in DRM, practical implementation remains limited, partly due to insufficient guidance. Mitigation efforts that incorporate gender considerations can help to build resilient infrastructure and inclusive policies that may reduce long-term risks and promote sustainable integrated water resources management.

Equitable and tailored interventions can help to protect vulnerable populations and uphold human rights, minimizing the immediate social and economic damage caused by disasters. Understanding how gender affects exposure, access to resources, needs and responses to hydrometeorological disasters lays the groundwork for designing DRM interventions and also for formulating targeted, equitable and inclusive climate adaptation strategies.

Ecosystems

The main drivers of aquatic ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss include climate change, land-use change and pollution. Analysing these complex linkages through the lens of gender equality can aid better understanding of their specific and often disproportionate impacts on women and men and highlight the various roles men and women play in water and ecosystem management, while contributing to gender equality.

Across cultures and communities, women have been involved in safeguarding and managing ecosystems for centuries – developing and transmitting local and traditional knowledge from generation to generation. Ensuring women have equal access to ecosystem services and are involved in ecosystem management can help reduce gender inequalities, contributing to more equal and resilient communities.

At the community level, social and political power dynamics can play a significant role in determining resources use and access, and their economic benefits. This is especially true where access to common lands or resources is restricted by gender-based discrimination rooted in socio-cultural norms.

The inclusion of traditional, Indigenous and local knowledge in water and ecosystem management is vital for local leadership and community-based water and ecosystem restoration and management approaches.

Adopting gendered approaches can foster more inclusive, resilient and innovative strategies to manage water-related ecosystems, by addressing the specific realities of women and girls. While women may bear a disproportionate burden of ecosystem degradation due to gendered roles, limited access to water and natural resources, and social inequalities, they fulfil active roles as community members and leaders who hold important knowledge that can contribute to resilient, productive and sustainable communities.

Capacity-building initiatives can also help to empower women and youth through education and professional development, thereby promoting gender equality in water-related professions. Gender-based messaging, monitoring and evaluation can bring about behavioural changes in participation and water use in communities, to prevent gender-related disparities in water access. By mainstreaming gender considerations into water management and climate-resilience efforts, Sub-Saharan Africa can move towards more equitable and sustainable development outcomes.



Strengthening governance structures may help to achieve equitable access to water resources and WASH services

Regional perspectives

Sub-Saharan Africa

Socio-economic obstacles, traditional customs and inheritance laws that have traditionally favoured men often exacerbate gender disparities in access to water across Sub-Saharan Africa. This can lead to unequal gender participation and impacts from water-related development and climate challenges. Strengthening governance structures may help to achieve equitable access to water resources and WASH services, recognizing the critical role women play in water management and decision-making processes and incorporating Indigenous knowledge.

Many water projects in the region are underfunded, and there is a need for increased investment to support gender-responsive initiatives. Inclusive and gender-responsive financing can help to address the water challenges of Sub-Saharan Africa. Leveraging mobile money technologies for bill collection, fostering public-private partnerships, and executing targeted marketing and communication strategies are key elements in building trust and attracting vital investments to enhance water infrastructure and services.

Gender-responsive financing can drive innovation in the water sector by encouraging the development of solutions that address the specific needs of women and marginalized groups. This requires collaboration between governments, international organizations and private sector stakeholders to mobilize resources and ensure financing mechanisms are inclusive and equitable in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Asia and the Pacific

Although gender dynamics vary across contexts, women and girls play a vital role in managing domestic and productive water resources. Yet they face gender-specific water challenges across Asia and the Pacific. These include: limited and unequal access; risks to health, safety, education, and economic and livelihood opportunities; under-representation in water governance; and increasing threats from climate change.

Significant progress has been made in WASH across the region; however, challenges remain in rural areas and informal settlements, with disproportionate impacts on women and girls. Evidence has shown mainstreaming gender and including women in water supply projects and policies can improve effectiveness, sustainability and equitable sharing of benefits.

Women – including from Indigenous and local communities – possess expertise and traditional knowledge as well as unique experiences, ideas and voices that are vital for shaping water resources policies, programmes, financing allocations and international dialogue.

Ensuring gender equality in water access, governance and management is a matter of social justice and also a prerequisite for sustainable development and climate resilience. Addressing the gender- and water-related challenges in Asia and the Pacific requires transformative changes in mindsets, social norms, data, policy and investment. Examples from across the region show how policymakers and practitioners can strengthen water governance by enhancing gender-responsive approaches, inclusive decision-making and targeted interventions recognizing women's and girls' key roles as agents of change.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Water is essential for domestic and caregiving tasks. In Latin America and the Caribbean, these responsibilities fall predominantly on women, and are typically unpaid and unrecognized.

Mainstreaming gender equality into water policy in Latin America and the Caribbean is feasible and transformative; however, it is moving at a slow rate with insufficient scaling up. Women – particularly those in rural and Indigenous communities – play a vital yet often unrecognized role in water access, management and environmental stewardship. When supported through inclusive policies and programmes, women's leadership can contribute to more equitable and sustainable water governance.

Nonetheless, persistent structural obstacles remain. Limited access to safe WASH services, unequal land and resources ownership, and women's under-representation in decision-making roles continue to reinforce gender-based inequalities. The burden of unpaid water-related work particularly restricts women's opportunities for education, employment and community participation.

Promising initiatives exist. They could be replicated by considering the different regional contexts, and scaled and adapted regionally. Recognizing and integrating ancestral and local knowledge, especially of Indigenous communities, is crucial for developing culturally relevant and sustainable water policies.

Achieving gender equality in water governance requires systemic change: investment in sex-disaggregated data, removal of institutional obstacles, investment in rural water infrastructure, and greater inclusion of women in water management and other interrelated sectors such as land and technology. These efforts are essential for social justice and also for building resilient, water-secure communities across the region.

Europe

Although Europe has achieved near-universal coverage in access to water supply and sanitation, gender-based disparities remain embedded in multiple dimensions of the water sector. Women remain under-represented in technical, managerial and policymaking roles in the water sector, despite notable progress in gender equality across European institutions. Structural impediments such as lack of mentorship, gendered job expectations and work-life imbalance can contribute to women's attrition and limited upward mobility.

Such gender inequalities are not simply a result of technical gaps but rather stem from deep-rooted institutional and sociocultural blind spots in how water systems are conceptualized, governed and financed. The role of women in water-related labour – especially in domestic and caregiving contexts – continues to be undervalued and largely invisible in water planning and budgeting.

A shift in how water governance integrates gender analysis may contribute to addressing these obstacles. Institutions could consistently collect and apply sex-disaggregated data in the design, implementation and monitoring of water policies. Valuing unpaid care and domestic labour within water service delivery systems and pricing frameworks could help to recognize the full economic contribution of women to water management.

By reflecting the intersectional realities of gender, age, ethnicity and economic status – which together determine levels of vulnerability to water-related hazards – conducting risk assessments could aid inclusivity. The application of gender-responsive budgeting tools at the national and European levels may encourage water investments to promote technical efficiency, social equality and long-term sustainability.

Arab region

The Arab region is one of the most water-scarce regions in the world. Additional crises can exacerbate the water challenge in the region, including climate change, conflict, and socio-economic and political upheaval. Women and girls frequently disproportionately shoulder the burden of these impacts due to stereotypes associated with traditional gender roles.

Valuing unpaid care and domestic labour within water service delivery systems and pricing frameworks could help to recognize the full economic contribution of women to water management

While there have been some advances in women's inclusion in water resources management, there is a need to build on the momentum. Education and training can help to equip women and girls with the knowledge and skills necessary to make an impact. A common persistent obstacle is the existence of gender stereotypes, which may hinder women's enrolment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and their participation in water management positions.

Gender mainstreaming policies can also help to support women's insertion in the water sector at the national and subnational levels. Multiple interventions could be used to overcome this, including more equitable hiring practices and programmes that increase women's influence in water management.

Robust monitoring and reporting mechanisms – along with sharing of good practices, success stories and lessons learned – can guide future initiatives on women leading the water management and WASH sectors and participating in decision-making processes while breaking through gender stereotypes that may inhibit women’s involvement.

While training and capacity-building can help to empower women, national policies are also needed to translate education into action.

Data, education and capacity development

Gender equality in water access and management, data on progress in gender equality, and the relevant education and capacity development needed for equality are essential for improving the lives of women and men and for achieving sustainable development well beyond the water domain.

The call for sex-disaggregated data in the water world is not new. Disaggregated data are routinely collected in other sectors, but methods of accounting for women’s undervalued time, even when they exist, remain underutilized. At best, gender data gaps are a missed opportunity to alleviate gender disparities in the water domain. At worst, they allow the ‘free’ labour of women to be taken for granted by communities, and also by researchers, donors and policymakers who continue to design and promote water technologies mislabelled as ‘low cost’, when in reality, once concomitant labour costs are considered, these are actually ‘high-cost’ water technologies.

Developing skills and in-country capacity to monitor and evaluate water programmes through a gender lens is essential for more equitable and more effective water management. Training women, through more equal access to STEM fields and professional opportunities, can make them stakeholders and leaders in knowledge generation and in water management decisions at all scales. Skills development (and certification) is needed to counter women’s current over-representation in low-value and underpaid water work and under-representation in decision-making and higher-paid positions.

Traditionally, states have been the primary duty bearers in this capacity-development role, but significant technical, managerial and financial support may be needed from the private sector and civil society partnerships. Internal and external finances, guided by principles of sustainability and equality in access and management, can help to smooth the path towards a more equitable and efficient water domain.

Governance

International normative and human rights frameworks have contextualized the primordial importance of water governance. Governance of water resources, access, distribution, services and provisioning has profound implications for people’s rights, resilience, livelihoods, health and well-being, and for sustainable development as a whole. This is particularly true for women, girls and gender-diverse people, and for their households and communities.

For decades, there have been calls for gender mainstreaming in water management and decision-making, amid evidence that women's participation is pivotal for effective and sustainable water projects and enhancing local water governance. However, there are stark gender gaps in water governance, leadership and financing at national, municipal and local levels, in government, public and private water utilities, and water management and user groups. Women's rights to and control over water resources and access to and benefits from water often remain unrealized.

When women and youth do participate in water governance, it can often be 'tokenistic'. There may be perfunctory or symbolic inclusion in meetings and consultations and reporting of their presence, without consideration of their mobility constraints, unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities, or whether they actively participate or influence decisions or policies.

Undervaluing women's labour, knowledge and expertise and gender stereotypes about women's suitability for certain kinds of work, including travel and fieldwork, underlie occupational segregation and gender pay gaps.

Promoting the real and effective engagement of women and girls in water governance may be achieved by enacting legal reforms and implementing supportive policies, raising awareness and advocating against discrimination and exclusion, and building stakeholder capacity to knowledgeably influence decision-making and policymaking at local, national and global levels.

Financing and investment

Gender-sensitive budgeting needs to be strongly encouraged, and supported by clear accountability mechanisms and full transparency. Experience shows that voluntary or ad hoc approaches consistently fall short, often resulting in tokenistic allocations and weak, unsustainable investments. Yet evidence shows the inclusion of women can improve financial returns by strengthening decision-making, improving bottom-up acceptance and increasing project efficiency.

There are stark gender gaps in water governance, leadership and financing

Developing assessments that are beyond typical financial return calculations and instead taking a longer and broader socio-economic valuation may help financial strategies to account for the essential yet often undervalued roles of women and girls in water systems. Such assessments could include elements (e.g. unpaid water-related domestic work, which carries significant economic value) to be recognized in financing strategies. The assessment of long-term cascading effects and values is challenging but crucial.

Meaningful participation in the financing process can strengthen trust, transparency and community ownership, which can improve the sustainability of investments. Specific and tailored modalities and strategies are needed to address structural impediments such as limited land ownership, banking access and credit histories, without perpetuating cycles of indebtedness.

Gender-responsive financing frameworks can be improved by integrating strong accountability and anti-corruption measures. Enhancing transparency in financial flows could protect resources while improving outcomes for gender equality in water financing. Additionally, gender-responsive financing must not deepen the debt burdens of developing countries and create new financial dependencies, thus undermining progress towards gender equality in the water sector.

Coda

Gender equality matters in access to water resources and fulfilment of the human rights to water and sanitation.

While women and girls are still largely responsible for water-related tasks at home, they are disproportionately affected by lack of access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services in schools, workplaces, health care facilities and households.

Access to water resources is generally linked to land tenure, directly affecting the availability of water for productive uses such as farming, leaving some women and men at social and economic disadvantages.

Lack of sex-disaggregated water data remains a fundamental blind spot, obscuring inequalities in access, labour and decision-making. Addressing this gap is important for effective and accountable water policies and investments.

Women are often under-represented in employment and decision-making related to water, undermining their capacity to contribute to improving water management practices. However, many women from different socio-economic, educational and professional backgrounds have been contributing to water management for decades. This report builds on their work, highlighting examples that can be useful for closing gender gaps in the water domain.

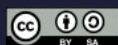
Addressing gender-based inequalities related to water is key to poverty alleviation, fulfilling the human rights to water and sanitation, and accomplishment of most Sustainable Development Goals.

When it comes to water, gender equality leads to enhanced opportunities for all.

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