

Women's issues



WaterAid/Layton Thompson

Water and sanitation are women's issues. The lack of these essential services has a huge impact on the lives of millions of women around the world. Without safe water close to home women spend hours walking for water, a task that consumes 26% of women's time in rural Africa. The lack of sanitation results in ill health and indignity for millions.

Women are central to all of our work at WaterAid and we ensure they are involved in all stages of planning and implementing water and sanitation projects.



WaterAid / Suzanne Porter

Rifkatu Musa, carrying clean water collected from her village handpump in Cobati, Aamko, Nigeria

Water

The role of water collection in developing countries predominately falls to women and girls, who can spend hours each day walking miles to collect water from unprotected sources. The tragedy is that the water which they work so hard to collect is often dirty, polluted and unsafe to drink, coming from rivers, ponds or simply holes in the ground. In urban areas, women either have to walk long distances to collect water, use polluted sources such as factory outlets or buy expensive water from vendors.

Because women can only carry a limited amount of water their family will often have to survive on a very small daily ration, especially in the dry season when water becomes particularly scarce. As water tables become lower, wells are dug deeper and

can become dangerous, causing falls and injuries. Accidents can also occur on the uneven paths that women walk down while collecting water.

Constantly carrying heavy water containers, that weigh



WaterAid / Marco Berti

Umadevi, president of the water committee in Premnaga, Uttar Pradesh, India, standing next to her latrine.

up to 20kg, on the head, hip or back, has severe health implications. In extreme cases curved spines and pelvic deformities can result, causing problems in childbirth. Further problems occur when women are menstruating and during childbirth because of a lack of water. Women are often unable to wash themselves or their baby, prepare traditional foods containing water or simply drink enough water to replace the fluids they have lost.

Sanitation

Not having somewhere safe and clean to go to the toilet creates more problems for women. When human waste is left in the open it can spread disease and pollute water sources.

However it is the issue of privacy and dignity that often impacts on women the most. In many cultures women have to wait until it is dark to relieve

themselves causing discomfort and sometimes illness. It can also further expose women to the risk of both sexual harassment and animal attacks. A lack of toilets in schools means that girls often miss out on their education, as they are forced to drop out as they reach puberty.

Working with women

WaterAid enables people to access clean water, improved hygiene and sanitation. However, the societies that WaterAid works in are generally male dominated so extra effort has to be taken to ensure women are equally included in all stages including planning, construction and decision-making. A lack of education for women in developing countries – often due to a lack of water or sanitation – means that very few women are decision-makers, yet enabling women's voices to be heard is a crucial step in development.

As the main users of the future water points women are best placed to choose the ideal location of a water source; and they also have a great deal of knowledge that is crucial in the planning stages, such as where the nearest, cleanest sources are and when they dry out. Equally, as women tend to care for children and homes, it is essential they understand the benefits of good hygiene such as covering stored water, hand-washing before eating and after defecating and using dish racks to keep utensils off the floor.

Involving women in projects also has a positive impact on

their social status. Women often become hygiene educators as they are able to talk to other women freely. They receive training and then spread messages throughout their community. By having an important role as hygiene educator, water committee member or sanitation block attendant women's status is enhanced.

Wider impacts

For women everywhere providing clean, accessible water and sanitation facilities not only prevents needless drudgery and indignity but improves their health and that of the whole family.

Young girls are able to attend school as they no longer have

to help their mothers collect water, and school attendance among girls raises by 11% when sanitation facilities are available, enabling them to carry on with their education when they are menstruating. Access to safe water and improved sanitation relieves the burden of illness, allowing women to work rather than look after sick children, and money saved in doctors fees and medicines can go towards food and livelihoods.

With water and sanitation women's time is freed up for agriculture or other income-generating work, looking after children or simply relaxing. Children – including girls – can go to school and over time as women gain more skills they gain more prominent roles in society, and so development continues.



WaterAid / Evva-Lotta Jansson

In Sandimhia Renato's village in Mozambique, women have to cross an unstable bridge to go to the toilet. Some have drowned crossing in the dark or at high tide.

Dirty water, no choice



WaterAid/Caroline Hby

Uleftae Munde lives in Manzo, Ethiopia, where the water source is the local pond.

“I have to collect my water from here every day. It is very difficult to drink this water – it feels very uncomfortable and gassy in my stomach. Most people here are sick from stomach diseases from drinking this. When the children get sick we use traditional medicine. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. When it doesn’t we take them to the clinic but the nearest one is about two hours from here. Even after taking them there most of the children die. Children often die here from the water. Often all of the money we earn from farming is spent on medicine.”

Female empowerment



WaterAid/Marco Betti

Ram Kanthi has been trained as a handpump mechanic with other women in Mahoba, Uttar Pradesh, India. The women each have a spanner and can carry out simple repairs within their villages.

“We women used to face many difficulties with our water. The handpump used to break down and we had to rely on the men to fix it. We had to go to the village head and ask him, but even then they weren’t repaired immediately and so we became independent ourselves, and we learnt to repair the pumps so that when they break down we can fix them as quickly as possible.

“At first when we entered the villages to repair the pumps the men used to say things like ‘Please don’t do anything; the handpump is functioning very well. What do you know?’ It was often like this. Now the men come to us and ask us to repair the handpumps!”

Good hygiene, good health



WaterAid/Caroline Hby

Mary Tian is a hygiene and sanitation promoter in her community in Otitingo Village, Katakwi, Uganda.

“I visit households and teach people how to construct and maintain latrines, bath shelters, dish racks, refuse pits and hand-washing facilities. I get people to ensure that their households are kept clean. Since I have been doing this rubbish is no longer scattered around the place, people appear to be smarter with clean clothes. We are now so relaxed and free to plan our day. Household activities like cooking and washing clothes have been simplified. I have seen a big change in the health of my family. We can use money that we used to spend on medical fees for improving our diet, buying books and soap. We now have prestige when visitors come to our compound.”

 **WaterAid**

WaterAid transforms lives by improving access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation in the world’s poorest communities.



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