



Submission to Joint Standing Committee Inquiry: Human rights issues confronting women and girls in the Indian Ocean – Asia Pacific region

This submission has been prepared for the Human Rights Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. It discusses human rights issues confronting women and girls in the Indian Ocean – Asia Pacific region, specifically as they relate to water, sanitation and hygiene access.

Lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene is a global crisis. Worldwide, 748 million people live without safe water and 2.5 billion live without improved sanitation.ⁱ The situation in our region is especially critical. The Pacific is one of just three regions—Sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia are the others—that will miss the MDG targets for improving access to water and sanitation.ⁱⁱ Papua New Guinea has one of the world’s lowest coverage rates of water and sanitation—just 19% of people use improved sanitation and only 40% have access to safe water.ⁱⁱⁱ In both Timor-Leste and Cambodia more than 60% of people lack adequate sanitation.^{iv}

The impacts of this lack of access are numerous and catastrophic, with women and girls among the most deeply affected. As Australia’s foreign aid program shifts its focus to the Indian Ocean – Asia Pacific region and strengthens its commitment to the empowerment of women and girls, dramatic improvements must be made to water, sanitation and hygiene access if women and girls are to realise their human rights.

Access to water, sanitation and hygiene is fundamental to the realisation of human rights for women and girls in the Indian Ocean – Asia Pacific region.

Globally, there is growing recognition that water, sanitation and hygiene are essential to realising the human rights of women and girls. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) expressly recognises water as a human right (Articles 11 and 12). Articulation of the rights to water and sanitation are enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the UN General Assembly Resolution on the ‘The Right to Development’ (1999).

While the current Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide a global vehicle to progress the realisation of these rights, they do not explicitly address the gender inequalities that arise due to unequal levels of access to water and sanitation, and the disproportionate impact of this inequality on women and girls. As the global community considers how we will progress development after the MDGs end, the post-2015 agenda provides a crucial opportunity to empower women and girls by improving their access to water, sanitation and hygiene.

Implications for economic and social development in the Indian Ocean – Asia Pacific region of promoting women and girls’ human rights

Access to safe water, improved sanitation and hygiene promotion for women and girls has a multiplier effect across households and communities. Water, sanitation and hygiene enables women and girls to be more productive members of society, improves women’s status, reduces vulnerability to physical and sexual violence, and keeps girls in school.

1. Improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene empowers women

The unequal burden of household and care work that women carry is both a human rights issue in itself, and an impediment to the realisation of other rights. Improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene can help redress this imbalance. In 72% of households worldwide women and girls are the primary water collectors, with girls twice as likely as boys to be tasked with collecting water.^v Freed from the burden of water collection, which can take hours each day, women and girls can use this free time to pursue education, work and other productive endeavours.

Despite being responsible for water collection, women are often excluded from participating in decision-making processes about water use at both community and national levels. WaterAid establishes community water committees in the countries where we work, to manage water and sanitation infrastructure and services post-construction. In Timor-Leste, half of the positions on these committees are reserved for women. Participation in the planning and construction process enables women to develop skills, builds confidence and transforms them into community leaders. Box 1 on the following page offers an example of positive changes in gender relations that have occurred as a result of women’s involvement in WaterAid’s water, sanitation and hygiene projects in Timor-Leste.

Box 1: Positive change in gender roles and relations in a Timor-Leste water, sanitation and hygiene program

WaterAid has worked in Timor-Leste since 2007. As a global organisation we have increasingly invested in addressing gender issues in our work, adopting equity and inclusion as core principles of our Global Strategy. Women involved in our programs in Timor-Leste have reported that increased access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education has led to:

- improved family relations and domestic harmony (which may include reduced levels of domestic violence);
- a shift in gender roles, with men helping more with tasks traditionally considered the domain of women, including water collection and childcare;
- women having increased voice and being listened to more, as well as recognition of women's rights by men;
- increased income through the ability to start market gardens and engage in other income-generating activities;
- improved health;
- increased cleanliness and associated social benefits.

Di Kilsby, Now we feel like respected adults, ACFID Research in Development Series, (ACFID: Canberra, 2012)

2. Improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene reduces vulnerability to sexual and physical violence

Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts the right of everyone to life, liberty and security of person. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women emphasises the need to eradicate violence against women if women are to realise their rights.

A lack of access to water and sanitation puts women at risk of injury, harassment and physical and sexual violence. In the slums of Honiara, women face journeys in excess of one kilometre to collect water or use the toilet, often through bushland or poorly-lit areas. Amnesty International has collected testimony from numerous women documenting their experience of physical or sexual violence during these journeys.^{vi} Similar experiences have been reported by women in the slums of Delhi.^{vii} Bringing water and sanitation closer to the home removes the need for women and girls to make these risky journeys, reducing threats to their life, liberty and security.

3. Water, sanitation and hygiene are integral to girls' education

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that all children have the right to an education (Article 28). Inside and outside of schools, access to water, sanitation and hygiene is integral to girls' ability to pursue an education.

In the home, inadequate access to water and sanitation is a major part of the gender gap in school attendance. This is largely due to the effect on chores, with girls' school attendance in Nepal and Pakistan shown to increase significantly for every hour reduction in water collection.^{viii}

At school, toilet facilities that provide water to wash menstrual cloths and a place to dispose of menstrual pads are crucial for keeping adolescent girls in school, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that absenteeism is higher when these facilities are not in place.^{ix} Sporadic attendance impairs school performance, and can eventually result in girls dropping-out. Providing girls with a space to manage their menstrual hygiene in private allows them to realise their right to an education. With a 1% increase to girls' secondary education resulting in an annual income increase of 0.3% per capita, helping girls to receive an education by facilitating greater access to water, sanitation and hygiene has clear benefits for society.^x

To improve the lives of women and girls in the Indian Ocean – Asia Pacific region, human rights must be placed at the centre of Australia's development program

WaterAid's experience providing water, sanitation and hygiene in 27 countries across the Pacific, Asia and Africa has informed its view that women and girls cannot live a life consistent with the realisation of their fundamental human rights without access to these most basic services. Promoting the right to water and sanitation is critical to ensuring dignity and self-worth for all human beings, women and girls in particular. In addition, it is through access to water, sanitation and hygiene that women and girls will enjoy the right to attend school, the right to good health, the right to work, and the right to life, liberty and security of person. The right to water and sanitation cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be seen in terms of its relationship with other human rights. For women and girls the realisation of the right to water and sanitation is a pre-condition to the fulfilment of other fundamental human rights.

Australia's foreign aid program must place the realisation of the fundamental human right to water, sanitation and hygiene at the core of its development framework, if women and girls are to overcome barriers to realising their rights in practice. Low coverage rates for water and sanitation in the Asia Pacific equate to negative development outcomes for women and girls in Australia's region. The links between lack of access to clean, safe water, sanitation and hygiene and poor health, education, economic and security indicators for women and girls are clear. It is therefore critical that the Australian Government strengthen its role as a global leader in shaping the post-2015 development agenda, ensuring that the right to water, sanitation and hygiene, and the rights of women and girls, take their necessary place as dedicated goals in the new Sustainable Development Goals framework.

ⁱ WHO/UNICEF, *Progress on Sanitation and Drinking-Water: 2014 Update* (Geneva: WHO, 2014), 8.

ⁱⁱ United Nations (UN), *Millennium Development Goals: 2013 Progress Chart* (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), 2013), http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/2013_progress_english.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ WHO/UNICEF, *Progress on Sanitation and Drinking-Water: 2013 Update*, 26-27.

^{iv} WHO/UNICEF, *2014 Update*, 54 and 69.

^v Clarissa Brocklehurst & Jamie Bartram, 'Swimming upstream: why sanitation, hygiene and water are so important to mothers and their daughters', *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 2010 (88), 482.

^{vi} Amnesty International, *Where is the dignity in that?* (London: Amnesty International, 2011).

^{vii} Shirley Lennon, *Fear and Anger: perceptions of risks related to sexual violence against women linked to water and sanitation in Delhi*, India (London: SHARE, 2011).

^{viii} Gayatri Koolwal & Dominique van de Walle, *Access to Water, Women's Work and Child Outcomes* (Washington: World Bank, 2010), 22.

^{ix} WaterAid, *Menstrual Hygiene Matters* (London: WaterAid, 2012), 31.

^x David Dollar & Roberta Gatti, *Gender Inequality, Income, and Growth: Are Good Times Good for Women?*, World Bank Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series 1, (Washington: World Bank, 1999), 20.