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Gender-transformative water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH): Foundational to achieving gender equality in the Indo-Pacific region

WaterAid welcomes the opportunity to inform the Australian Government's new Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade gender equality strategy.

Gender inequality and poor WASH

Globally and across the Indo-Pacific, gender equality will not be achieved without strong WASH systems. Poor rates of WASH access exacerbate gender inequality and prevent women and girls in all their diversity from realising their full potential. Poor, weak or non-functioning WASH leads to increased domestic labour, exclusion from decision-making and leadership, exacerbation of the gendered impacts of the climate crisis, poor maternal and menstrual health outcomes, and increased risks of violence.

Globally women and adolescent girls are primarily responsible for water carriage in seven out of ten households using water sources located off premises.¹ It is estimated that women spend 3.2 times more time than men on unpaid care work.² Unpaid domestic work increases when water sources are located far away, or services are broken or don't exist. For example, cooking, laundry, bathing children and managing household hygiene take longer when water sources are far away or not-functioning; and women's care work increases when children and older people are sick from consuming unsafe water.

The Pacific is one of the most off-track regions in the world for SDG 6. For example approximately 70% of people in the Pacific Islands region still lack access to basic sanitation services.³ Advancing

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organisation (WHO) (2023) Progress on household drinking water sanitation and hygiene 2000-2022: Special focus on gender. New York

² Charmes J. (2019) The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market. An analysis of time use data based on the latest World Compilation of Time-use Surveys /; International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2019.

³ WHO & UNICEF (2021). *Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Pacific Region and Pacific Islands 2000-2020*. Joint Monitoring Programme. <https://washdata.org/reports/unicef-2021-regional-snapshot-pacific>

gender equality in the Pacific cannot be achieved without a focus on improving water, sanitation and hygiene outcomes for women and girls.

Beyond their household work burdens, women and girls also face specific challenges caused by insufficient WASH in schools and healthcare facilities – disrupting their education, preventing them from accessing sexual and reproductive health services, and impacting their livelihoods as frontline health workers.

Menstruation and WASH

Menstruating adolescent girls and women in most countries often do not participate in school, work and social activities.⁴ Numerous studies have shown that girls are particularly impacted by inadequate sanitation facilities in schools; alongside stigma, lack of a clean and private location to change menstrual materials contributes to missed classes and school days.⁵ In households with shared sanitation, women are less likely to feel very safe and more likely to feel very unsafe walking alone after dark.⁶ JMP data from 2021 shows Oceania is the worst performing global region for sanitation access in schools, with 40% of schools having no sanitation service at all.⁷ This is particularly influenced by two of the most populous Pacific countries, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea which have the highest (64%), and seventh highest (42%) proportion of schools in the world without any sanitation service respectively. In Solomon Islands in 2021 only 17% of schools had basic sanitation services.⁸

A regional review across 19 EAP countries to assess progress in menstrual health-related policies, service delivery, and evidence between 2016 and 2022⁹ identified there is limited menstrual health services for population beyond adolescent girls, such as adult women in the workplace or older women experiencing menopause. It found no evidence of menstrual health services for people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). There was very limited evidence of government budget allocation towards menstrual health services, and only 3 out of 14 countries had clear implementation arrangements of policies, strategies and guidelines on menstrual health.¹⁰

Four international gender equality priorities

WaterAid calls on DFAT to champion gender-transformative WASH in its Gender Equality Strategy as an essential service to be developed, delivered and monitored with a central focus on women's and girls' empowerment. WaterAid makes four key recommendations:

1. Leverage and invest in multi-sectoral partnerships which sustain women's rights organisations and coalitions, and women leaders, for systems change

Women's leadership and equal decision-making in WASH

⁴ UNICEF; WHO (2023)

⁵ Hennegan J, Shannon AK, Rubli J, Schwab KJ, Melendez-Torres GJ. Women's and girls' experiences of menstruation in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review and qualitative metasynthesis. *PLoS Med.* 2019 May 16;16(5):e1002803. doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1002803. PMID: 31095568; PMCID: PMC6521998.

⁶ UNICEF; WHO (2023)

⁷ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) & World Health Organization (WHO). (2022). *Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in schools: 2000-2021 data update*. New York

⁸ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) & World Health Organization (WHO). (2022).

⁹ Head, A., Huggett, C., Chea, P., Suttor, H., Yamakoshi, B. and Hennegan, J., (2023) *Menstrual Health in East Asia and the Pacific: Regional Progress Review*. United Nations Children's Fund, Burnet Institute and WaterAid, Bangkok.

¹⁰ Head, A., et al (2023).

One of the largest gender gaps across the Indo-Pacific is political empowerment.¹¹ Women's exclusion from political leadership remains pervasive, for example there are only two women elected to PNG's parliament¹²; and in Cambodia women represent less than a quarter of parliamentary seats. There is an increasing focus on women's leadership across WASH and water sectors, such as the World Bank's 'Equal Aqua' platform which is driving gender inclusion in water organisations.¹³ Some trends show that private companies are employing more women,¹⁴ however despite women's primary role in shouldering the domestic WASH burden, women are grossly underrepresented in the field of WASH. Fiji's Gender Assessment (2023) highlighted that the Fiji Water Authority board has no women members,¹⁵ and called for women to be central to the decision-making on services that they are often primarily responsible for within homes. The SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway, 2014, recognises women as key change agents in WASH.¹⁶ WASH and water governance is an opportunity to foster greater women's leadership.

WASH governance models promote diverse leaders and intersectionality

Global development funding flows show that 0.4% of ODA focused on gender equality goes to feminist funds.¹⁷ In the Pacific, evidence shows less than 1% of grant funding is directed to Pacific women's organisations.¹⁸ Grassroots critical action is needed where diverse rights-holder organisations are at the centre of development work, in order to shift power, narratives, policies and structural inequalities. Strong intersectionality practice to acknowledge and address diverse experiences is needed. People with diverse SOGIESC are disproportionately impacted by WASH and water, and engagement with rights groups and communities to understand their WASH needs and challenges; jointly support leadership, advocacy and movement-building.¹⁹ Similarly women with disabilities require targeted leadership; decision-making opportunities in WASH. The new gender equality strategy must address intersectionality and diverse leadership in the governance of all sectors, including WASH and water resource management, to ensure solutions are made by diverse leaders with a range of lived experience.

Inclusive WASH for Wewak District, Papua New Guinea (*Water for Women Fund*)

WaterAid supports representation from the East Sepik Council of Women (ESCOW) and the East Sepik Disabled People's Association (ESDPA) on the government-led District WASH Committee. These local rights partners have been active advisers within the committee since 2017, contributing to decisions about the District's WASH system and service delivery. ESCOW provides a violence referral pathway and information to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, while ESDPA links people with disabilities to services. ESCOW and ESDPA have permanent roles on the District WASH Committee, where they raise awareness and inform the District WASH Plan's specific provisions on inclusive WASH. Women and people with disabilities are now benefiting from safe water and sharing information on hygiene and healthy living.

2. Prioritise alleviation of women's unpaid labour through stronger gender-transformative WASH services and systems

¹¹ Global Gender Gap Report (2021) World Economic Forum, Available at:

https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

¹² <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2022/08/08/hope-for-women-in-png-elections-peter-becomes-lone-female-governor/>

¹³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/brief/inclusive-water-institutions-platform>

¹⁴ UNWomen (2022) Experts Take: The gender challenges in Asia and the Pacific that will dominate in 2022

<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/experts-take/2022/01/the-gender-challenges-in-asia-and-the-pacific#fn1>

¹⁵ Fiji gender assessment report

¹⁶ Fiji gender assessment

¹⁷ AWID (2021) Where is the money for feminist organising? Data snapshots and Call to Action

https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/AWID_Research_WITM_Brief_ENG.pdf

¹⁸ Fiji Womens Fund (2021) Where is the money for women and girls in the Pacific? Mapping funding opportunities, gaps and trends. <https://womensfundfiji.org/resources/partner-publications/where-is-the-money-for-women-and-girls-in-the-pacific/>

¹⁹ WaterAid (2021) Organisation Statement of Intent <https://www.wateraid.org/au/supporting-people-who-are-lgbtqi-at-wateraid-a-statement-of-intent#:~:text=We%20recognise%20that%20people%20with,violations%20in%20their%20daily%20lives.>

Target 5.4 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) involves the recognition and valuing of unpaid care and domestic work. Unequal gender power relations and pervasive social norms mean that women often carry out the unpaid labour in communities and households. Unpaid labour is inextricably linked to WASH. When WASH services are weak, in disrepair or non-existent, daily unpaid workloads increase,²⁰ which falls to women and adolescent girls. Household WASH initiatives can tackle intimate household discussions, address social norms and relationships between women and men. WASH social norms change efforts target households and communities right through to policy and government priorities.

The new Gender Equality Strategy needs to explicitly outline gender transformative WASH as a lever for positive change on alleviating and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work. The strategy must outline how stronger WASH systems and services can progress positive changes to redress the balance more fairly between men and women; and highlight that WASH actors and their services and systems play a pivotal role for gender and feminist actors to fully address gender inequality and alleviate women's unpaid work burden.

Shifting household gendered division of labour in rural Timor-Leste (Water for Women Fund)
Since 2016, a participatory rural WASH service delivery model integrated facilitated gender dialogue sessions in Timor-Leste. The approach leveraged WASH as a strategic entry point to discuss gendered norms and roles, and support transformation towards gender equality. Quantitative and qualitative data collected as part of the follow-up sessions with 22 communities after completion of the community water systems showed there have been positive, sustained changes to the types and distribution of roles women play within both their households and communities, as well as the participation of women in decision-making. Almost all respondents indicated there had been some degree of change in the role men as opposed to women play in collecting water for the household. In Manufahi municipality an average of 75% of respondents in a community reported either a 'Medium' or 'Large' positive change in men's role in collecting water. In Liquiçá, this figure was closer to 65%. Local partners have leveraged community facilitators experience to inform their national influencing of WASH in Timor-Leste.

3. DFAT to take a global leadership role in menstrual health; and address the significant unmet need as part of essential SRHR and WASH services

The menstrual health needs of millions of girls, women and people who menstruate in the East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region go unmet. Those who menstruate face restrictions on their mobility, choices, and participation in school and community life. DFAT's Pacific Women Lead program acknowledges menstrual health as a component of sexual reproductive health and rights. Development initiatives must attend to all five requirements of menstrual health. The definition of menstrual health can serve as a framework to assess progress and identify gaps.²¹ Evidence is urgently needed to guide the selection of policy initiatives that work to improve menstrual health experiences and outcomes. Despite the critical importance of a strong evidence base, little funding has been directed to rigorous evaluations or trialling candidate policy and practice interventions. Where policies and strategies already include menstrual health, strong institutional arrangements, costings, and budget allocations are needed. Investment in capacity strengthening is needed for menstrual health across the health, WASH, education and other relevant sectors. Improved monitoring of menstrual health at multiple levels, including national monitoring and integration into

²⁰ WaterAid (2022)

²¹ Julie Hennegan, Inga T. Winkler, Chris Bobel, Danielle Keiser, Janie Hampton, Gerda Larsson, Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli, Marina Plesons & Thérèse Mahon (2021) Menstrual health: a definition for policy, practice, and research, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:1, 31-38, DOI: [10.1080/26410397.2021.1911618](https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2021.1911618)

the monitoring and evaluation of individual programs, is essential for accountability, to track progress and to inform better practice.

The Pacific Menstrual Health Network (ANCP funded)²²

The Pacific Menstrual Health Network (the Network) is a multi-sectoral network strengthening collective advocacy, action and shared learning across Fiji, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The Network comprises members who are committed to improving menstrual health outcomes across the Pacific. An independent evaluation (2022) found that the Network was effective in contributing to collective action, advocacy and shared learning. Members identified the power of association with the Network, new partnerships and tangible outcomes as highly valued benefits. Members acknowledged the complexities of working collectively in different cultural contexts and praised the supportive environment as enabling factors for the Network's success. There was also evidence of ongoing commitment to the Network as a vehicle for change and improvement of menstrual health in the Pacific.

4. Foster women's environmental resilience through gender-transformative climate resilient WASH systems

Addressing the gender impacts of climate change requires a transformative WASH adaptation commitment. Climate change and water are inextricably linked: the impacts of climate change will mostly be felt through the water cycle. As rainfall becomes less predictable people will be faced with longer droughts and more intense wet periods. Higher temperatures will increase evaporation. Rising sea levels will reduce available freshwater through saltwater intrusion. After a flood event, rates of diarrhoeal diseases – such as cholera – may increase, especially where sanitation facilities and hygiene practices are poor. These impacts add additional burden on women.

Access to WASH services and improved water resources management provide people with vital protection from climate change impacts. As people shift from relying on surface water (springs and lakes) to more reliable sources such as groundwater, tanks or reservoirs, they are better able to manage water supplies and cope during periods of drought. Proper water resources management can improve equitable allocation and use of limited resources. Social norms dictate that women provide their households with a WASH service. If social norms on household work have not changed, then as soon as a disaster hits, all those gains are lost.

Climate provisions of the new gender equality strategy must address resilient WASH solutions which incorporate local and appropriate gender-just technologies (along with training, mentorship and technical support). The strategy must call for national climate policies and adaptation plans to address gender-transformative WASH to ensure that the burden and exacerbated impacts experienced by women and girls in all their diversity and people with diverse SOGIESC are protected. Climate change commitments by national governments which will lead to new jobs in WASH (e.g. water resource management and waste management) must promote women's equal opportunity.

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²² WaterAid (2022) Evaluation of the Pacific Menstrual Health Network
<https://www.wateraid.org/au/publications/pacific-menstrual-health-network-evaluation-full-report-2022>