

The Global Water Crisis: A Gender Perspective

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The Global Picture



Understanding the crisis

- 703 million people still lack clean water.
- 2.2 billion lack safely managed drinking water.
- Women and girls spend 250 million hours every day fetching water.

Causes

- Climate shocks (droughts, floods, heat) intensify scarcity.
- How water is governed determines outcomes: inclusive, transparent systems can build trust; poor governance deepens inequality and conflict.
- When women are ignored in water services, they become 'the infrastructure'-walking, carrying, queuing, rather than shaping solutions.

Effects

- Every day, more than 1,000 children under 5 die from unsafe water and poor sanitation.
- Women and girls lose time for school, work, and rest due to water collection.
- Collecting water exposes women to harassment, violence, and health risks.
- But when women lead in water decisions, communities gain dignity, safety, and opportunity.



Realities on the Ground: Women's Water Journeys

Pakistan

Issues

- Women carry a heavier share of water insecurity than men.
- Unsafe water affects women more deeply- from menstrual health to childcare and household care.
- Women live with the constant stress of shortages, queues, and harassment, yet remain excluded from decisions.



Solutions

- National water & gender policies exist but implementation is weak without women's voices driving them.
- Some local regulation is starting around tankers and filtration points, yet the real difference will come when women's leadership shapes how water is managed.



Issues

- Cultural and religious norms often block women from leadership in water governance-many women don't see themselves as agents of change.
- Women are included mainly as beneficiaries, not as decision-makers, which limits systemic change.
- Laws and policies ignore gender (e.g., Water Resource Act 1993 has no gender clause) and existing policies remain weak in practice.
- Women sustain water systems with their daily labour yet remain excluded from shaping how they are run.

Pathways Forward (with early steps emerging)

- Awareness is rising: gender is now on the agenda through Nigeria's Gender Policy and AU/ECOWAS commitments but still mostly "on paper."
- Community dialogues with NGOs, women's groups, and traditional leaders are opening space for women's voices.
- Institutional change is needed: permanent gender focal points, legal reforms, and better data to capture women's realities.
- Building women's leadership skills in advocacy and water management can turn inclusion from token to transformational.



Ethiopia, Somali Region

- Five consecutive droughts, then devastating floods, displaced 240,000+ people across 33 districts.
- Entire villages submerged, livestock lost, families forced to flee again after earlier shocks.
- Women and girls bore the brunt: unsafe water journeys, harassment, child marriage, and health risks in crowded IDP sites.
- In community meetings, cultural and religious norms silence women- their needs remain invisible in water and aid decisions.
- Scarcity and damaged infrastructure fuel conflict between displaced and host communities, and among pastoralists over boreholes and rivers.

Lessons

- Early warnings were issued, but most women never received them-they had no phones, no access to information, and no space to question decisions.



- Back-to-back droughts (2018-2020 and 202-2024) caused severe water shortages, crop failures, and livestock deaths, destabilizing livelihoods.
- As water and food dwindled, women increasingly migrated across borders to Namibia and Angola to earn income and support families.
- On the move, women faced heightened risks: harassment, exploitation, and gender-based violence.
- Competition over scarce water and grazing land triggered conflict between farmers and herders, while weak coordination and delayed responses eroded trust in institutions.



Lessons

- Climate shocks push women into unsafe migration when systems fail to protect them.
- Resilience means anticipating risks and ensuring women are part of early warning, planning, and cross-border governance, not left to carry the risks alone.

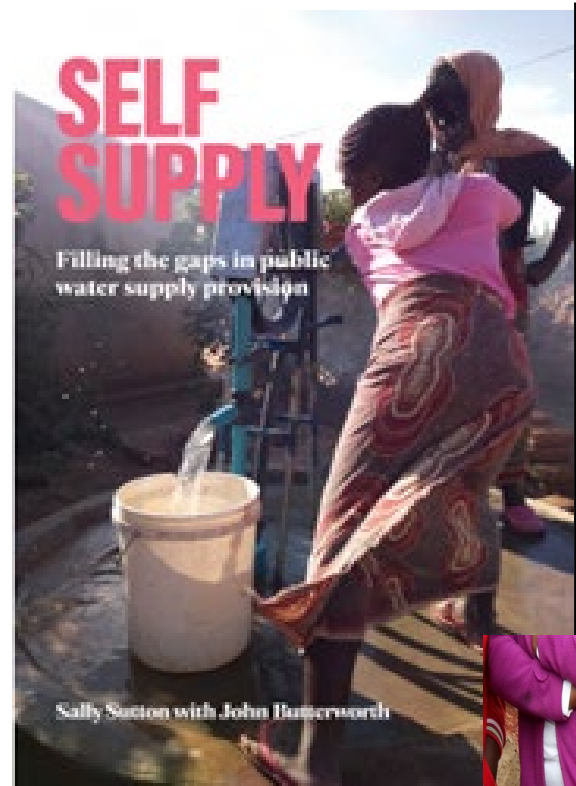


Issues

- Despite progressive laws, many rural and peri-urban communities still lack reliable water.
- Women carry the burden: walking long distances, sustaining households, and running community water committees but often without decision-making power.
- Water supply has focused on domestic use, ignoring women's productive needs (gardening, small livestock, home enterprises).
- This limits women's economic opportunities and reinforces dependency.

Pathways/Emerging Lessons

- MUS pilots show that when water serves both domestic and productive needs, women's livelihoods and resilience grow.
- Water & Sanitation Community Forums (WSCFs) are proving how local voice and accountability can be strengthened.
- To sustain these gains, women-led forums need resources and recognition-so their leadership is not left unpaid or invisible.
- The opportunity now is to scale women-led solutions into municipal and national water planning.



Integrating Water and Sanitation Community Forums in municipal and national water planning



Facilitative guidelines for municipal officials, policy-makers, and community leaders

INTEGRATING WATER AND SANITATION COMMUNITY FORUMS INTO MUNICIPAL PLANNING AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION IN SOUTH AFRICA







Thank you

