

Water and Gender:

Addressing

Inequalities and

Empowering Women

for Sustainable

Water Access

April 2026



Introduction



Every year on 22 March, the world observes World Water Day, a global platform established by the United Nations to evaluate progress, highlight challenges, and mobilise action on freshwater access, sanitation, and sustainable management. Coordinated through UN Water, the UN's interagency mechanism for water issues, the observance aligns with efforts to meet the water-related targets of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Because water is essential to life, health, food production, livelihoods, and ecosystems, its equitable availability shapes outcomes across societies. Yet the lived experience of water access, who collects water, who benefits from improved services, who is most affected when systems fail, is deeply shaped by social structures, including gender.

The 2026 theme, "Water and Gender," foregrounds this insight: water insecurity does not affect all people equally. While global infrastructure and services have expanded, there remain stark gaps in both access and equity. According to the latest global estimates from the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme

for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP), the authoritative source for monitoring progress toward SDG 6, approximately 2.2 billion people lacked safely managed drinking water services in 2022. In the same reporting period, 3.5 billion people lacked safely managed sanitation services, and 2 billion people were without basic handwashing facilities at home. These deprivations not only reflect infrastructure deficits but also intersect with socioeconomic vulnerabilities that disproportionately burden women and girls.

Where water is not available on premises, and households must rely on sources located off-site, studies synthesised by the JMP and partner agencies show that women and girls disproportionately shoulder the responsibility of water collection. In many low- and middle-income settings, women aged fifteen and above are most often responsible for collecting water for their households. Girls under fifteen also take on this role more frequently than boys of the same age. This gendered division of labour creates a substantial time burden, requiring multiple daily trips to distant water sources, often while carrying heavy loads across difficult terrain.



As a result, time poverty limits opportunities for education, income generation, rest, and civic engagement, while further reinforcing existing inequalities. The consequences of water insecurity extend beyond time use. Inadequate access to water and sanitation directly impacts health and dignity. Tenuous access to clean water undermines essential hygiene behaviours, contributing to the transmission of waterborne diseases. For women and girls, insufficient water and sanitation infrastructure, particularly in schools, health facilities, and public spaces, complicates menstrual health management, reduces privacy and safety, and reinforces social exclusion. These dynamics have been documented in multiple countries where improved water infrastructure correlates with reductions in water-related illnesses, improved school attendance among girls, and enhanced well-being among women caregivers.

Viewed through a development lens, the linkages between water and gender are not isolated technical issues but fundamental to progress on multiple SDGs. The pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 6, universal access to safe water and sanitation, cannot be disentangled from Sustainable Development Goal 5, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Water systems shaped without consideration of gender roles and power dynamics risk reinforcing existing inequalities instead of mitigating them. Conversely, when water systems are designed and governed with gender equity in mind, they contribute to broader development gains: improved educational outcomes, expanded labour force participation, strengthened health systems, and more inclusive governance.

Moreover, gender considerations are critical

in how water systems respond to emerging global pressures such as climate variability, rapid urbanisation, and population growth. Climate-driven droughts and floods disproportionately impact communities already facing water stress, further complicating the work of women and girls who manage household water needs. At the same time, decision-making spaces, from community water committees to national water policy platforms, often underrepresent women, inhibiting the integration of diverse perspectives into planning and resource allocation.

In this context, the 2026 theme calls for a shift toward gender responsive water governance. This means systematically collecting and using sex disaggregated data, designing infrastructure that reduces time burdens and physical risks, integrating menstrual and reproductive health needs into service planning, and expanding opportunities for women's leadership in water management institutions. It also requires sustained commitments from governments, civil society, development partners, and private actors to embed gender equity into financing mechanisms, policy frameworks, and accountability systems.

As the global community inches closer to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, grounding water policy and practice in rigorous gender analysis is both a moral imperative and a practical necessity. The design of water systems, the priorities set in budgets and planning processes, and the voices included in decision-making will determine whether progress on water services is not only measurable but equitable. In recognising that water and gender are deeply intertwined, we move closer to a future where water access strengthens human well-being, expands opportunity, and advances justice for all.

The Gendered Impact of Water Insecurity

In many households, women and girls carry the primary responsibility for collecting water, representing about 70% of cases. This estimate is based on harmonised national data sources, including the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), which inform JMP reporting. Such unequal distribution of responsibility reinforces existing gender disparities and deepens the human consequences of water insecurity.

The routine task of fetching water often requires long trips and the transport of heavy containers, taking up several hours each day. This significantly reduces the time available for education, income-generating activities, rest, and participation in community life. Research shows that girls in households located far from safe water sources are more likely to miss school or drop out, especially during menstruation, when poor sanitation facilities make attendance challenging. This underscores the strong link between water access, gendered roles, and educational outcomes, highlighting that water and gender are closely interconnected elements of sustainable development.

Health and safety consequences further underscore this gendered impact. Women and girls face risks of musculoskeletal injury from carrying water, as well as potential harassment or violence while travelling to distant water points. Inadequate water at home and in schools limits basic hygiene practices, increasing susceptibility

to waterborne diseases and complicating menstrual health management, maternal care, and child caregiving responsibilities. Globally, billions remain without handwashing facilities with soap and water at home, which is strongly associated with higher rates of preventable illness, disproportionately affecting women who are primarily responsible for family hygiene.

The economic ramifications are equally significant. Time spent collecting water constrains women's ability to engage in paid work, entrepreneurship, or community leadership, perpetuating cycles of poverty and social exclusion. Conversely, evidence shows that providing water closer to households reduces the labour burden for women, enhances productivity, and correlates with higher school attendance among girls, demonstrating that gender-responsive water interventions have broad social and economic benefits.

Taken together, these data reveal that water insecurity is not only a technical or infrastructure issue but a deeply gendered social challenge. Addressing it requires policies and programs that recognise women and girls as primary water users and agents of change, integrating their needs, experiences, and leadership into water system design and governance. Linking these insights to the 2026 World Water Day focus emphasises that achieving equitable water access is essential for advancing both gender equality and sustainable development outcomes.



Water, Health, and Dignity



Water is fundamental to human health, yet global monitoring reveals persistent gaps that disproportionately affect women and girls. According to the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP, 2023), an estimated 2.2 billion people lacked safely managed drinking water services in 2022, and 3.5 billion people lacked safely managed sanitation services, meaning toilets and latrines that are not shared with other households and where excreta are safely disposed of or treated. Additionally, the JMP reports that 2.0 billion people did not have a basic handwashing facility with soap and water at home, a critical barrier to effective hygiene practices that protect against disease. These statistics reflect large-scale survey data from national censuses and household surveys (including DHS and MICS), making them the most comprehensive validated estimates available for

global water and sanitation access.

For women and girls, the lack of safe water and sanitation services has direct consequences for health, dignity, and everyday life. Evidence from multi-country studies shows that inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure is strongly associated with a higher incidence of waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera, and typhoid. Diarrhoeal diseases remain a leading cause of death among children under five, accounting for approximately 444,000 deaths annually, or about 1,200 child deaths each day worldwide (UNICEF, 2021; World Health Organization, 2023). These deaths are closely linked to unsafe water, poor sanitation, and inadequate hygiene conditions, which remain major environmental risk factors for disease (World Health Organization, 2023).

While these health risks affect entire communities,



the burden of maintaining household hygiene, providing care, and tending to sick family members falls disproportionately on women. This unequal distribution of care responsibilities amplifies the gendered impact of gaps in water and sanitation access.

Inadequate water and sanitation also undermine menstrual hygiene management. A UNICEF analysis shows that in many low and middle-income countries, schools lacking basic water and sanitation services have significantly lower attendance rates for adolescent girls during menstruation. This absence of facilities that provide privacy, water, and menstrual product disposal increases girls' discomfort, absenteeism, and risk of dropping out, with long term implications for education and economic opportunity.

Beyond health, the absence of safe, private sanitation contributes to protection risks. Evidence from global field studies indicates that women and girls who must walk to distant or unlit sanitation facilities face heightened risk of harassment and gender based violence, particularly at night. Compounding this, the physical effort of manual hygiene tasks, including fetching limited water and carrying water for household needs, contributes to musculoskeletal strain, particularly when water sources are remote or unreliable.

Hygiene practices such as handwashing with soap are among the most effective interventions for

reducing disease transmission. The JMP estimates that 2.0 billion people lack basic handwashing facilities, which underscores a widespread deficiency with gendered consequences: women, as primary caregivers, are more frequently responsible for maintaining household hygiene and are therefore disproportionately affected when water and soap are unavailable.

Improving water and sanitation access yields measurable health dividends. Community-level studies from countries across Africa and Asia demonstrate that when households gain piped water on premises and access to safely managed sanitation, rates of diarrhoeal disease fall sharply, and overall health outcomes improve. These improvements boost women's capacity to engage in livelihoods and reduce the caregiving burden that water-related illness imposes.

Water and sanitation are not merely technical services but determinants of health, dignity, and gender equity. Validated global data consistently show that when safe water, sanitation, and hygiene are lacking, women and girls experience greater risk and responsibility, whether through disease exposure, caregiving demands, menstrual hygiene constraints, or threats to personal safety. Addressing these gaps through gender responsive policies and infrastructure is therefore central to improving public health and advancing equitable development.



Economic and Social Consequences of Water Insecurity

Water insecurity has profound economic and social implications, particularly for women and girls, and these impacts extend beyond individual households to communities and national development. Globally, WHO/UNICEF JMP (2023) reports that over 1.8 billion people rely on off-premises water sources, requiring daily collection. In these households, women and girls perform most water collection duties, approximately 70% of cases, often spending 2–6 hours per day carrying heavy containers over long distances (WHO/UNICEF JMP, 2023). This time burden represents a significant opportunity cost, limiting participation in education, paid employment, and community leadership.

Education is directly affected by water insecurity. UNICEF studies indicate that in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, girls' school attendance increases by 5–10% when water is available on premises, highlighting the link between safe, accessible water and female educational outcomes (UNICEF, 2022). Conversely, long distances to water sources and inadequate sanitation facilities in schools are associated with higher absenteeism and dropout rates among adolescent girls, particularly during menstruation.

Water insecurity also exacerbates health and caregiving burdens, which have economic consequences. Women often bear the responsibility of caring for children and family members affected by waterborne illnesses such as diarrhoea, cholera, and typhoid. Globally, diarrhoeal diseases remain a leading cause of mortality in children under five, responsible for approximately 370,000 deaths annually, a burden

closely linked to unsafe water and poor sanitation (WHO, 2022). Time and energy spent on caregiving reduce women's ability to engage in income-generating activities and community participation, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality.

At the community and national levels, water-related time poverty translates into decreased labour productivity. The World Bank (2022) estimates that inefficient water access accounts for millions of lost workdays annually in water-stressed regions, with the majority of this lost labour contributed by women. Conversely, evidence shows that investing in gender-responsive water infrastructure, including piped water to homes and safely managed sanitation facilities, not only reduces the burden of unpaid labour but also increases women's economic participation, enhances human capital through better educational outcomes, and strengthens social cohesion.

Water insecurity also perpetuates inequities in decision-making. Women who bear the brunt of water collection are often underrepresented in household and community resource allocation decisions, including water committees and local governance structures. Evidence from multiple country case studies demonstrates that when women participate in water governance, services are more responsive, maintenance is more consistent, and systems better reflect household needs, creating lasting social and economic benefits (UN-Water, 2021).

Taken together, these data underscore that water insecurity is both a gendered and a socio-economic challenge. Time poverty, health risks, educational setbacks, and constrained economic participation



are mutually reinforcing consequences that disproportionately affect women and girls. Addressing these challenges requires targeted, gender-responsive interventions in water infrastructure, governance, and policy. Doing so not only improves access but also empowers

women and girls, strengthens communities, and lays the foundation for broader development gains. This understanding naturally leads to the next consideration: the critical role of women in water leadership and governance, which is central to achieving sustainable and equitable water systems.

ACT Foundation's Contribution to Water and Gender Equity



ACT Foundation has taken a proactive approach to addressing the gendered dimensions of water insecurity, focusing on both service delivery and empowerment. Recognising that women and girls are disproportionately affected by limited water access, the Foundation has implemented programs that integrate infrastructure improvements with gender-responsive governance and capacity building.

One key area of intervention is community water

infrastructure. ACT Foundation has supported the installation of safely managed water points within or near households in over 25 rural communities across Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo States in Nigeria, serving approximately 45,000 residents. Monitoring data from these programs show that women and girls in these communities experienced a reduction of 2–4 hours per day in time spent collecting water, consistent with findings from WHO/UNICEF JMP (2023). This reduction in time burden has enabled girls to attend school more consistently and women



to engage in income-generating activities or community decision-making.

In addition to infrastructure, ACT Foundation emphasises women's leadership and participation in water governance. Through targeted capacity building and advocacy initiatives, the Foundation has increased female representation in community water committees by 20–35% in these pilot regions. These efforts have resulted in measurable improvements in service delivery, including a 28% increase in maintenance compliance and a more equitable allocation of water resources. Communities report increased satisfaction with water services and greater responsiveness to household needs.

ACT Foundation also integrates health, hygiene, and sanitation components into its programs. Training for women beneficiaries includes menstrual hygiene management, household water treatment, and sanitation awareness. Monitoring data indicate a 20% reduction in reported cases of waterborne illnesses among children under five in participating communities, consistent with evidence from UNICEF and

WHO that combining infrastructure with hygiene education significantly reduces disease incidence.

Finally, the Foundation's initiatives extend to policy advocacy and knowledge sharing. By documenting program outcomes, best practices, and lessons learned, ACT Foundation contributes to broader discussions on gender-responsive water governance. This approach aligns with Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), demonstrating that strategic investments in water infrastructure, leadership, and community engagement can advance both equity and sustainable development.

Through these integrated interventions, ACT Foundation exemplifies how combining infrastructure, governance, health education, and capacity building can reduce the gendered burdens of water insecurity, improve community resilience, and empower women and girls to participate fully in development processes. These insights set the stage for the final section, which will synthesise key findings and provide actionable recommendations to further enhance water access and gender equity.



Conclusion



Water insecurity is both a technical and a social challenge, and its impacts are disproportionately felt by women and girls. Across global and local evidence, including WHO/UNICEF JMP (2023) and UN Women (2022), limited access to safely managed water, sanitation, and hygiene services not only constrains health and education outcomes but also perpetuates economic and social inequities. Women and girls spend hours daily collecting water, face heightened exposure to waterborne diseases and safety risks, and have a limited voice in decision-making processes that affect their communities.

ACT Foundation's programs demonstrate that targeted, gender-responsive interventions can mitigate these burdens. Infrastructure improvements, such as on-premises water access, reduce daily time spent collecting water by 2–4 hours, increasing school attendance for girls and economic participation for women. Capacity building and leadership training have increased female representation in community water committees by 20–35%, improving maintenance compliance by 28% and fostering equitable resource distribution. Hygiene and sanitation education, integrated with infrastructure, has contributed to a 20% reduction in waterborne illness among children under five in program communities.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to advance water and gender equity:

Expand gender-responsive water infrastructure: Prioritise on-premises water access, safely managed community water points, and private sanitation facilities in underserved regions to reduce the time and health burden on women and girls.



Strengthen women's leadership and participation: Actively increase female representation in water governance bodies at community, regional, and national levels. Provide training in leadership, technical water management, and advocacy to ensure meaningful participation.

Integrate health, hygiene, and sanitation education: Pair infrastructure investments with training programs on safe water handling, menstrual hygiene management, and household sanitation to maximise health outcomes and reduce disease incidence.

Use data-driven program design and monitoring: Collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data on water access, time use, health outcomes, and community satisfaction. Apply findings to refine interventions, improve accountability, and document best practices for replication.

Promote policy advocacy and knowledge sharing: Encourage governments, NGOs, and community leaders to adopt evidence-based, gender-sensitive water policies. Share lessons learned from successful programs to inform national and regional strategies.

Link water access to broader development goals: Recognise that improving water security for women and girls advances SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and other social and economic objectives. Program designs should explicitly target these intersections to maximise impact.



References

UNICEF. (2022). WASH and education: Field evidence on gender impacts. United Nations Children's Fund. <https://www.unicef.org/reports>

UN-Water. (2021). United Nations world water development report 2021: Valuing water. UNESCO. <https://www.unwater.org/publications/world-water-development-report-2021>

UN Women. (2022). Global database on gender and water. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. <https://data.unwomen.org/>

World Bank, & UN-Water. (2022). Water security and country resilience: Strategic frameworks and economic estimates. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water>

World Health Organisation. (2022). Diarrhoeal disease. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/diarrhoeal-disease>

WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JUMP). (2023). Progress on household drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene 2000–2022: Special focus on inequalities. World Health Organisation & United Nations Children's Fund. <https://washdata.org/reports>



Contact us



14, Ahmed Onibudo, Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria



www.actrustfoundation.org



+234 812 293 9984



info@actrustfoundation.org



@Aspire Coronation Trust Foundation



@AspireCoronationTrustFoundation



@actfoundation_



ACT Foundation



@ACTFoundation_



ACT Foundation Podcast (ACTPod)

