



REPORT A/HRC/33/49 was submitted to the Human Rights Council in September 2016 by the Special Rapporteur. It focuses on gender equality in the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation. Gender equality is a fundamental human rights principle, yet inequalities between men and women are observed in all countries, including on the basis of gender identity. Cultural, social, economic and biological differences between women and men consistently lead to unequal opportunities for women in the enjoyment of the human rights to water and sanitation.

Challenges

HEALTH CONCERNS



Women and girls are primarily responsible for water and hygiene at the household level and bear the greatest burden for collecting water, provoking greater risk of psychological stress and physical impairment.



Water, sanitation and hygiene needs are critical to prevent high maternal and newborn mortality rates. Women and girls who hold their urine for long periods of time have a higher risk of bladder and kidney infections.



Many women and girls risk their health using unhygienic sanitary methods, as other methods are unaffordable, unavailable or unknown owing to stigma and taboos related to menstruation.

GENDER INEQUALITY IS PERSISTENT IN ALL COUNTRIES

In his report, the Special Rapporteur underscores:

- ▶ The importance of placing a strong focus on the needs of women and girls at all times, throughout their whole life-cycle.
- ▶ That special attention must be given to the needs of those women and girls living with certain disabilities or health conditions, enduring life in poverty or suffering from other disadvantages.
- ▶ The effects of gender inequality in access to adequate water and sanitation on a wide range of other human rights, including women and girls' rights to health, to adequate housing, to education and to food.

To achieve gender equality in the enjoyment of the human rights to water and sanitation, the Special Rapporteur stresses the need for a transformative approach:

- ▶ Governments and broader society must challenge social norms, stereotypes and intra-household patterns.
- ▶ Gender-responsive interventions must be promoted that prioritize the implementation of women's specific needs.
- ▶ Laws, policies and government strategies must eliminate and not inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes.

Other efforts can serve as entry points to address gender inequalities:

- ▶ Addressing women's material needs by improving access to affordable menstrual products.
- ▶ Considering women's strategic needs by tackling harmful gender stereotypes and structural determinants of inequalities that affect access to water, sanitation and hygiene.

Léo Heller

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation



@srwatsan



@srwatsan

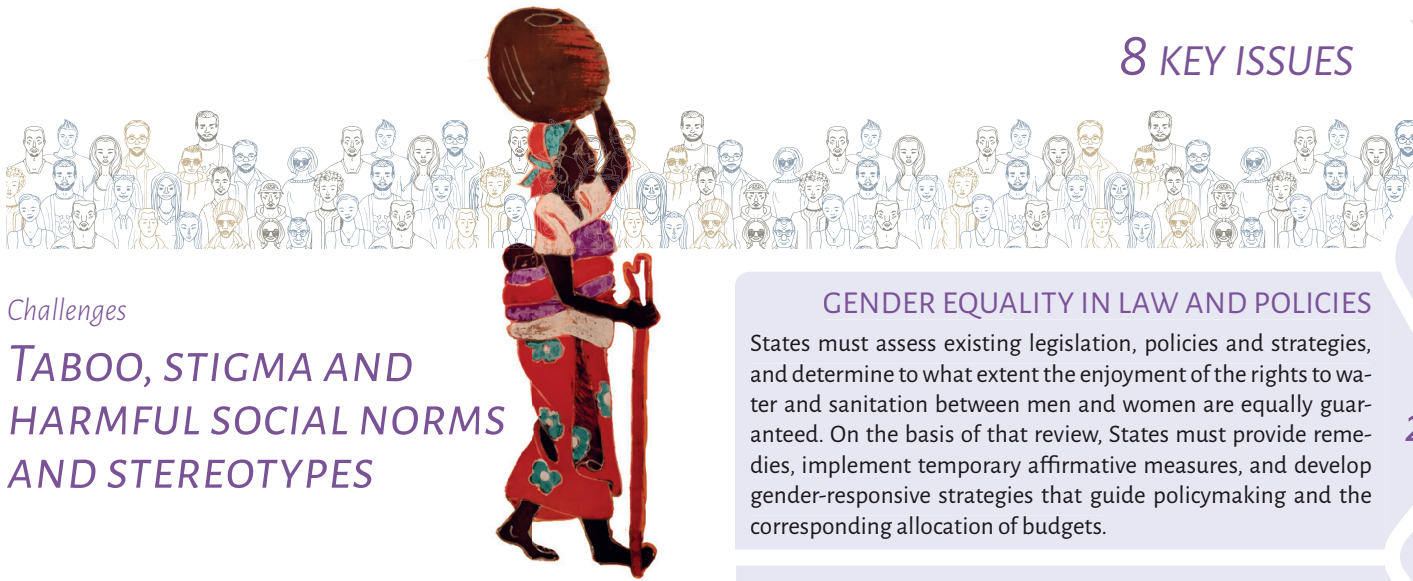


srwatsan@ohchr.org



TOOLS FOR TRANSFORMATION

GENDER EQUALITY IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS TO WATER AND SANITATION



8 KEY ISSUES

Challenges

TABOO, STIGMA AND HARMFUL SOCIAL NORMS AND STEREOTYPES



Menstruation is generally considered something unclean or impure. Girls all over the world grow up with the idea that menstruation is an embarrassing and shameful event.



The fact that in many instances women and girls risk being harassed when they relieve themselves in the open or in public facilities is partly due to the structural and systematic use of stereotypes and stigma.



Women and girls often have less access to financial resources than men and materials to manage menstruation can be a particular burden for those living in poverty.



Sociocultural norms, notions of “female modesty”, masculinity and stereotypes translate into lesser opportunities, power and control over finances and resources, as well as unequal household responsibilities.



Poor menstruation management has far-reaching consequences for society as a whole and a lack of knowledge by both women and men reinforces the taboos on this topic.



A lack of adequate facilities in public spaces often leads women and girls to avoid the public, work and school-life, particularly during menstruation, when they live with disabilities or suffer from incontinence.

GENDER EQUALITY IN LAW AND POLICIES

States must assess existing legislation, policies and strategies, and determine to what extent the enjoyment of the rights to water and sanitation between men and women are equally guaranteed. On the basis of that review, States must provide remedies, implement temporary affirmative measures, and develop gender-responsive strategies that guide policymaking and the corresponding allocation of budgets.

SOCIAL NORMS AND STEREOTYPING

States must actively combat practices that are based on harmful stereotypes of men and women, including in the private sphere. Men and boys also have an important role in education and empowerment initiatives. States could partner with civil society to design and implement awareness-raising programmes that reveal “invisible” social norms and power relations, and promote positive and non-stereotypical portrayals of women.

PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Participation is a fundamental human rights principle. Women's and girls' voices are indispensable to ensuring that their needs are understood and prioritized, including on material and privacy requirements for menstrual hygiene management. Policies and special measures need to be adopted to tackle gender inequalities in practice and strengthen women's voice and participation.

AVAILABILITY AND AFFORDABILITY

Standards in regulations and building codes should include special needs for women and girls, and must be developed for schools, hospitals, the workplace, market places, places of detention, public transport hubs and public institutions, among other places. The human rights to water and sanitation include the right of all to affordable, safe and hygienic sanitation and menstruation materials, which should be subsidized or provided free of charge when necessary.

USING AN INTERSECTIONALITY LENS

Gender-based inequalities may be exacerbated when they are coupled with other grounds for discrimination and disadvantages. Examples include when women and girls lack adequate access to water and sanitation and at the same time suffer from poverty, live with a disability, live in remote areas, lack security of tenure, are imprisoned or are homeless. The effects of social factors such as caste, age, sexual orientation and gender identity are compounded when they intersect with other grounds for discrimination. States should therefore use an “intersectionality lens” in all policy initiatives, to ensure that special attention is given to those most disadvantaged persons in the enjoyment of their rights.

QUALITY, HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES

Services must be adapted to the specific needs of users by, for example, taking into account the characteristics of their bodies, including their physical abilities, and their age. Different women prefer different menstrual products; information must be provided so women can knowledgeably use the product they feel most comfortable with and manage their menses hygienically.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND MONITORING

Women must be able to enforce their rights to water and sanitation. For this, strong accountability and monitoring frameworks must be put in place. But these will only be effective if women are systematically provided with opportunities for meaningful participation, decision-making and access to and control of resources. Gender indicator systems must be developed to improve the collection of data disaggregated by sex and other relevant factors.

VIOLENCE & PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS

In attempting to meet their water, sanitation and hygiene needs (e.g. carrying water, managing menstruation, defecating and bathing) women may have to deal with serious stress, not to mention the risk of physical violence. States must take all measures necessary to remove the barriers that deter people from having access to adequate facilities. Thus, building codes should include gender considerations such as sex-segregated facilities and lighted pathways to and at facilities. While awareness is needed to create a positive transformation towards gender equality, discrimination and violence based on gender identity must be prevented, investigated and remedied, and those responsible must be prosecuted.