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Contribution by UN Women

to the CSTD 2022-2023 priority theme on “Ensuring safe water and sanitation for
all: a solution by science, technology and innovation”

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**United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)
25th annual session**

Priority theme 2: Ensuring safe water and sanitation for all: a solution by science, technology and innovation

Inputs from UN Women

The **sixty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2022 (CSW66)** examined as its Priority theme: Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes. The below are relevant extracts from the [Agreed Conclusions](#):

“The Commission expresses concern that climate change, the pollution of air, land and water, biodiversity loss and decline in ecosystem functions and services threaten the full enjoyment of human rights of all women and girls and have acute impacts on women and girls, especially on rural, indigenous and migrant women and girls.”

“The Commission also recognizes the adverse impact of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters on health as well as on the other environmental determinants of health, such as clean air, safe water and sanitation.”

“The Commission stresses the importance of investing in accessible and sustainable infrastructure and technology, including in rural areas, such as access to safe water and sanitation, including water for irrigation, energy, transport and information and communications technology, and other physical infrastructure for public services.”

“The Commission recalls that the human rights to safe drinking water and to sanitation are essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights. It is deeply concerned that water scarcity and disruptions to supply induced by climate change, environmental degradation and disasters disproportionately affect women and girls, with women walking long distances or waiting hours in queues to obtain water, which restricts their time for other activities, such as education and leisure, or for earning a livelihood. The Commission underlines that gender-responsive water and sanitation services and infrastructure are key to bolstering the resilience of all women and girls, and further recognizes the need to expand women’s and girls’ access to adequate, safe and clean water and sanitation facilities, including for menstrual health and hygiene, especially in disaster relief and humanitarian shelters.”

“The Commission urges governments at all levels and as appropriate, with the relevant entities of the United Nations system and international and regional organizations, within their respective mandates and bearing in mind national priorities, and invites civil society, inter alia, women’s organizations, youth-led organizations, feminist groups, faith-based organizations, the private sector and national human rights institutions, where they exist, and other relevant stakeholders, as applicable, to take the following actions:

...

- Integrate a disability-inclusive and gender perspective into the development, review and implementation of laws, policies and programmes on climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, sustainable natural resources management, including land and water, land-use and urban planning and disaster risk reduction, that support the resilience, adaptive capacities, livelihoods, food security, access to safe water and sanitation, health and well-being of all women and girls in rural and urban areas; and ensure women’s equal rights to economic resources, including access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, and technology and financial services, including microfinance;
- Promote a gender-responsive approach and the full, equal, effective and meaningful participation of women in decision-making and leadership of women and, as appropriate, girls in water and sanitation and household energy management in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk

reduction policies and programmes; take measures to reduce the time spent by women and girls on collecting household water and fuel and protect them from threats, assaults and sexual and gender-based violence while doing so and when accessing sanitation facilities outside their homes or practising open defecation and urination; ensure access to water and sanitation and hygiene, including menstrual health and hygiene management, for all women and girls, especially those in marginalized and vulnerable situations, including in schools and other educational settings, workplaces, health centres, public and private facilities and at home; and address widespread silence and stigma, as well as the negative impact of inadequate and inequitable access to sanitation on the access of girls to education;

- Support and fund research and analysis to better understand the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters on women and girls, including in relation to child, early and forced marriage, trafficking in persons, paid and unpaid care and domestic work, health and education, food production, water and sanitation, violence against women and girls, and in other areas, to determine the linkages between the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and climate change, environmental degradation and disasters, in order to inform policies and programmes and to assess women’s abilities to cope with and adapt to climate change, environmental degradation and disasters, particularly in developing countries and small island developing States.

...”

Key messages on water and sanitation:

Water pollution, water scarcity and floods are having adverse and disproportionate impacts on women and girls.

- Water pollution, water scarcity and floods have disproportionate impact on women and girls which adversely affects the realization and enjoyment of their human rights including the right to health, water and sanitation, food, work and livelihoods and a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.
- As water resources once held in common are increasingly enclosed, privatized or “grabbed” for commercial investment, local communities and indigenous peoples, particularly women, whose livelihoods depend on them, are marginalized and displaced. In this process, sustainable livelihoods, health, rights and dignity are jeopardized ([UN Women 2014](#)).
- Women play key roles in generating change in the way water is used, shared, and allocated, from local to transnational levels and in spite of legal, regulatory and institutional frameworks that provide little space for their participation in planning and decision-making. There is a circular and reinforcing relationship between the constrained roles of women in governance and the under-valuation of their roles in production and resource use, the ensuing underappreciation of their knowledge about the resource, their constrained rights to access resources, which limits their economic opportunities as well as their representation of communities’ economic interests, thus perpetuating an under-recognition of their roles in productive activities ([IUCN 2018](#)).
- When safe drinking water is not available on household premises, the burden of water collection and treatment falls largely on the shoulders of women and girls. The lack of safe sanitation and hygiene facilities at home may expose them to illness, harassment and violence, hampering their ability to learn, earn an income, and move around freely. Where household members fall sick due to water-borne illnesses, it is mainly women and girls who provide the much-needed care ([UN Women 2020](#)).
- The disproportionate responsibility women and girls bear as primary users, providers, and managers of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) at the household level is yet to be matched by a commensurate representation in WASH-related decision-making. While women’s participation in water governance and the promotion of safe sanitation has long been encouraged, this engagement has not always translated into better services for themselves, and decisions on “big water” issues—such as large-scale infrastructure investments, water allocations, or water trading—remain largely gender-blind ([UN Women 2018](#)).

- Reducing the time spent on water collection and improving school sanitation is also important for achieving quality education and effective learning outcomes among girls (SDG 4). In Tanzania and Yemen, for example, a one-hour reduction in water collection time increases girls' school enrolment by about 19% and 9% respectively. Where gender-responsive sanitation facilities are unavailable, girls may miss school or suffer psychosocial stress ([UN Women 2018](#)).
- Among adult women, investments in water and sanitation can free up time and facilitate access to a wider range of employment opportunities, including in non-traditional sectors, potentially contributing to the realization of their right to work and rights as work as well as the achievement of decent work and poverty eradication (SDGs 1 and 8) ([UN Women 2018](#)).
- **Safe sanitation is a gate-way service for the enjoyment of other human rights.** Pursuing the human right to sanitation and gender equality requires that policymakers and practitioners incorporate women's voices and women's unique needs in tracking progress towards this goal, project planning and infrastructure design, and in the creation of financing options and government partnerships ([UN Women 2016](#)).
- There is a direct link between the rights afforded to women on access to resources, and the accepted roles of women in decision-making related to water. For example, traditionally in Bhutan the inheritance of **land rights** was accorded to daughters rather than to sons. Women there shouldered most of the agricultural work, including water management, and decision-making with respect to managing the river for agriculture in times of scarcity was mostly done by women. With some caveats, women's voices are heard articulating their demands, and they appear to be almost as connected to the local level government functionaries as the men in this society ([IUCN 2018](#)).
- **Unequal inheritance rights** and customary practices that discriminate against women contribute to limited asset ownership, more unstable earnings and higher food and water insecurity ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](#)).

Climate change has exacerbated water-related issues

- Climate change is a gendered issue which has exacerbated water-related challenges. Women women disproportionately suffer from the impacts of climate-related natural disasters, including flooding and have reported having to travel greater distances to secure water and to spend more time caring for ill people of all ages as a result of an increase in disease (including respiratory diseases, skin diseases and diseases such as the zika virus, chikungunya and dengue, caused by higher numbers of mosquitoes) ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](#)).
- Gender norms and power dynamics shape how women and men of different backgrounds experience or contribute to insecurity in a changing climate. For example, water scarcity can expose women to increased risk of gender-based violence; faltering livelihoods can contribute to men's decisions to join armed groups and drought can shift pastoralist migration patterns causing families to split, increasing household burdens for women and infringing on the realization and enjoyment of their rights ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](#)).
- Women have always been at the forefront of movements demanding climate and environmental justice. Their lived realities demonstrate how drivers of the climate crisis also perpetuate systems of oppression that fuel economic, gender, and racial injustice.
- Gender inequalities in terms of access to finance, natural resources, technology, knowledge and mobility, among other productive assets, constrain women's and girls' ability to respond to and mitigate their disproportionate experience of climate change impacts. Gender inequalities, in turn, are further exacerbated by climate-related hazards, resulting in what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found to be "higher workloads, occupational hazards indoors and outdoors, psychological and emotional stress, and mortality" for women as compared to men ([UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP 2020](#) and [IUCN](#)).

- The continued marginalization of women in decision-making spheres further limits the agency and influence of women and girls and undermines the effectiveness of environmental actions by preventing the full breadth of participation needed to develop truly holistic and inclusive solutions. Excluding women from decision-making prevents effective, gender sensitive policy making and stops women from contributing their skills, knowledge and experiences, which could benefit entire communities. Evidence shows that women's empowerment and leadership and advancing gender equality can deliver results across a variety of sectors, including food and economic security and health. It can also lead to more environmentally friendly decision making at household and national levels ([UN Women 2014](#)).

What can States and businesses do in terms of addressing water pollution, water scarcity and floods?

- The importance of involving both women and men in the management of water and sanitation has been recognized at the global level, starting from the 1977 United Nations Water Conference at Mar del Plata, the [International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin](#) (January 1992), which explicitly recognizes the central role of women in the provision, management and safeguarding of water. Reference is also made to the involvement of women in water management in Agenda 21 (paragraph 18.70f), and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (paragraph 25) ([UN Water 2006](#)).
- The full, effective and accelerated implementation of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) and the fulfilment of the obligations under the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) are mutually reinforcing in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and the realization of their human rights, and the report should call upon States that have not yet done so to consider ratifying or acceding to the Convention and the Optional Protocol.¹
 - The Convention sets out an agenda to end discrimination against women, and explicitly **references both water and sanitation** within its text. Article 14(2)(h) of CEDAW provides: "States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right: ... (h) To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communication".
- States must ensure availability and sustainable management of water, as well as access to safe and affordable drinking water and adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all women and girls, as well as for menstrual hygiene management, including for hygiene facilities and services, in homes, schools, temporary shelters for refugees, migrants or people affected by natural disasters, humanitarian emergencies or armed conflict and post-conflict situations and in all other public and private spaces; take measures to reduce the time spent by women and girls on collecting household water; address the negative impact of inadequate and inequitable access to drinking water and to sanitation and energy services on the access of girls to education; and promote women's full, effective and equal participation in decision-making on water and sanitation ([CSW 63 Agreed Conclusions](#)).
- The Commission recalls that the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation are essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights. It is deeply concerned that water scarcity and disruptions to supply induced by climate change, environmental degradation and disasters disproportionately affect women and girls with women walking long distances or waiting hours in queues to obtain water, which restricts their time for other activities, such as education and leisure, or for earning a livelihood. The Commission underlines that gender-responsive water and sanitation services and infrastructure are key to bolster the resilience of all women and girls, and further recognizes the need to expand women's and girls' access to adequate, safe and clean water and

¹ United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 2131, No. 20378.

sanitation facilities, including for menstrual health and hygiene, especially in disaster relief and humanitarian shelters. ([CSW66 Agreed Conclusions](#)).

- (t) Promote a gender-responsive approach and the full, equal, effective and meaningful participation of women in decision-making and leadership of women and, as appropriate, girls in water and sanitation and household energy management in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, and take measures to reduce the time spent by women and girls on collecting household water and fuel and protect them from threats, assaults and sexual and gender-based violence while doing so and when accessing sanitation facilities outside of their home or practicing open defecation and urination, and ensure access to water and sanitation and hygiene, including menstrual health and hygiene management, for all women and girls, especially those in marginalized and vulnerable situations, including in schools and other educational settings, workplaces, health centres, public and private facilities and at home and address widespread silence and stigma as well as the negative impact of inadequate and inequitable access to sanitation on the access of girls to education ([CSW66 Agreed Conclusions](#), 62(t))

Good practices in preventing, reducing, or eliminating water pollution, water scarcity and floods.

- **Hydropower** as a renewable energy resource can be a boon for sustainable development, but if projects are not well-designed or managed can have negative impacts on local communities and the environment, including displacement, land dispossession, loss of livelihoods and environmental degradation, with detrimental consequences for women and girls ([UNEP 2016](#)). In Vietnam, the Trung Son Hydropower Project (TSHP) was designed with a strong gender action plan for the implementation of its large livelihood, minority and resettlement programme. The programme focused on five areas: (1) promoting gender equality in access to compensation under the resettlement plan; (2) strengthening the overall monitoring system of the livelihood improvement activities; and enhancing the capacities of TSHP staff on gender-aware data collection and reporting; (3) increasing rates of participation by women in livelihood activities; (4) reviewing training content and methods, and coaching district women's union in their use; and (5) developing and successfully piloting cost-effective, appropriate, and innovative solutions to reach out to the most vulnerable ethnic Hmong populations and inform them about project impacts and compensation in their own language. ([World Bank 2017](#))
- **Solar Water Pumping for Drinking and Irrigation in Mozambique** | In the village of Ndombe, the maintenance and repair of the photovoltaic (solar) water pumping system is managed by the community. Many women are involved in its maintenance and operation collect money from water users and are actively involved in community management. Benefits for women include the creation of productive activities, since the improved irrigation system allows women to sell vegetables and fruits and increase their income. The improved yield of crops also impacts diets, reducing malnutrition especially among women and children. Early results have shown an alleviation of women's water-related drudgery through increased access to safe drinking water for more than 2,000 people in at least four communities. There are now new and better sources of livelihood for women in seven vulnerable communities through enhanced water supply for agricultural irrigation and livestock ([UNIDO](#)).
- **Good water governance will be a cornerstone of global water security over the coming decades.** A central dimension of water security involves the protection, allocation and sharing of increasingly scarce and polluted water resources among humans and the environment. Comprising approximately 50% of the population and despite their recognised pivotal role in water management since 1992 through the Dublin principles, women remain under-represented in water governance processes in local, national and transboundary settings. This is problematic not only from a human rights perspective, but also because governance processes are made more effective through inclusion of all stakeholders.

- Women are extremely active in water management through productive and conservation activities, on account of the de facto gender-based division of labour at the household level. However, it is water governance, representing the exercise of control, authority and voice or the ability to influence decision-making that presents important gender challenges. For example, [IUCN Environmental Gender Index \(EGI\)](#) from 2013 shows that Ministries of Water are the least likely to have a gender focal point.

UN Women Resources and Other References

- [Agreed Conclusions of the 66th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women \(2022\)](#)
- [Report of the Secretary-General on Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes \(2022\)](#)
- [Expert papers for the 66th Session of the Commission on the status of Women \(2021\)](#)
- [Mainstreaming gender in water and sanitation sector in COVID-19 Response \(2020\)](#)
- [World Survey on the role of women in development: Gender equality and Sustainable Development 2014 | UN Women](#)
- [Towards Gender Equality through Sanitation Access 2016 | UN Women](#)
- [Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda: Gender-responsive water and sanitation systems 2018 | UN Women](#)
- [Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020: Families in a changing world 2020 | UN Women](#)
- [Gender, climate and security: Sustaining inclusive peace on the frontlines of climate change 2020 | UNEP, UN Women, DPPA, and UNDP](#)
- [Menstrual hygiene management: behaviour and practices in the Louga region, Senegal 2014 | UN Women](#)
- [Women as change-makers in the governance of shared waters 2018 | IUCN](#)
- [Gender, Water and Sanitation: A Policy Brief 2006 | UN Water](#)
- [The Rising Tide – A New Look at Water and Gender 2017 | World Bank Group](#)
- [Gender and Hydropower: Women's Rights in the Development Discourse 2017 | Center for Social Development Studies](#)
- [Lessons learnt from gender impact assessments of hydropower projects in Laos and Vietnam 2017 | Journal of Gender and Development](#)
- [Gender Equality & Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, Expert Group Meeting Report \(2017\)](#)
- [Towards Gender Equality Through Sanitation Access \(2016\)](#)