

Message to panel on Women and the Rights to water and sanitation
Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation

Catarina de Albuquerque

Thank you for organizing this important panel on women and the rights to water and sanitation. I am sorry that I cannot be with you today, and hope that you have a fruitful discussion.

With 2.6 billion people still lacking access to basic sanitation, and almost a billion still suffering without access to an improved water source, the sanitation and water crisis continues unabated. When we consider that we don't know how many people drink unsafe water because quality deteriorates in the distribution network or in storage, nor do we know how many people do not have access because it is too expensive, we understand that the crisis is even bigger than the numbers we assign to it.

Women are at the center of the crisis. Not only does lack of access to water and sanitation have a disproportionately negative impact on women's human rights, but women are also the key actors who can lead us to a changed world – where everyone has access to water and sanitation which is safe, affordable, and acceptable.

You are all well aware of how women are burdened with household chores related to water collection. Girls spend hours walking to water sources to collect water for their families instead of going to school. Women and girls who have to walk distances to access sanitation facilities or water sources face the risk of violence along the way.

When it comes to open defecation, women and girls face heightened risks of attack – not only by men, but also by animals. This is integrally linked to cultural presuppositions about women's modesty, leading women to sneak into the bush to defecate at night, walking as quietly as possible. This approach leaves them vulnerable to snake bites as snakes will be startled by their presence – as opposed to men who walk boldly into the bush to relieve themselves, scaring away snakes and other animals as they approach.

Lack of access to water and sanitation also affects women differently because of their menstrual hygiene needs. Without appropriate facilities, women and girls are forced into undignified situations related to their menstrual hygiene, which impact their ability to realize their rights. For instance, various reports have indicated that the lack of toilets in schools has a concrete effect on adolescent girls missing school or dropping out when they reach the age of menstruation. A lack of adequate washing facilities and menstrual management will also often keep women out of work.

In the majority of cultures, women and girls are responsible for caring for sick relatives, who will not only require good quality water to ensure better recovery, but may also be suffering from illnesses that demand good access to safe sanitation and good hygiene behaviour to ensure that illnesses are not transferred to other members of the family. These responsibilities also keep girls out of school and women out of work.

Despite these well-known disparate impacts on women and girls, too often, women and girls are excluded from decision making about water and sanitation. Too often women are not consulted about the placement of water points and sanitation facilities, or the type of facility that is best suited to their needs, even though women are the ones who face the most dangers in accessing these facilities, and are required to maintain them. Women place a higher priority on having a toilet or latrine within the household than men do. However, women rarely have control over the household budget to make such an investment. Women are also primarily responsible for educating children about basic hygiene. Without ensuring this basic hygiene awareness, the benefits of safe sanitation will never be realized – but too often, women are not targeted with awareness raising efforts.

There is, however, evidence that where women and girls are placed at the centre of developing water and sanitation strategies, where women and girls are given the opportunity of taking control of the type and location of facilities, that this leads to more sustainable solutions.

Water and sanitation programmes that focus on community management increasingly demand that women are represented on water and sanitation committees, in order to ensure that women's voices are heard in decision-making processes on access to water and sanitation services. In Mumbai, for example, the slum dwellers women's network Mahila Milan have been successful in constructing and managing public toilets, which have been designed not only with the needs of women in mind, but also the needs of their children.

Given the opportunity to borrow micro-finance, many women choose to use loans to improve their access to water and sanitation –in Egypt, I saw that loans to women to pay for water connections were life changing.

There is also evidence that the leadership roles that women have played in Community Led Total Sanitation campaigns, a campaign that aims to eliminate open defecation and improve access to safe sanitation, has provided the opportunity for women to take up other leadership roles within their communities.

The provision of toilets, together with hygiene promotion, in schools has increased girls' school attendance, giving them a chance for a better life.

Menstrual hygiene and the requirements of menstrual management is being openly discussed by service providers, NGOs and civil society, breaking centuries of taboo around a basic female need and changing the way that sanitation facilities are designed and conceived, and improving the availability and knowledge around appropriate menstrual management products.

Improving women's control over their access to water and sanitation services, and encouraging women and girls to make the most of their associated improved health and the availability of extra time, saved from fetching water, challenges the patriarchal model, where men hold the purse strings and control the household budget.

Without an explicit focus on the differential impacts on women resulting from a lack of access to water and sanitation, as well as on the need to empower women to claim these rights, we will not see improvements in these areas for society as a whole. I encourage your efforts to draw attention to the need to devote specific attention to women and girls in this regard. This is crucial for ensuring the full enjoyment of human rights by women and girls, as well as guaranteeing the rights to water

and sanitation more specifically. We have already started down the road of women's empowerment through improving the availability and management of water and sanitation services, but there is much still to be done. I applaud you in your choice of subject matter to address this crucial issue.