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Introduction: gender and water, sanitation and hygiene

Caroline Sweetman and Louise Medland

At birth and death, and each day in between, human needs for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are near-constant. In the most intimate and personal ways, WASH offers 'life-giving or life-threatening potential at some of the most spectacular and mundane moments of life for each of us' (Woodburn 2016, no page number).

This issue of *Gender & Development* focuses on WASH from the perspective of gender justice and women's rights. WASH is an acronym adopted by the UN in 2007–8, the International Year of Sanitation. The W of WASH stands for Water, specifically access to safe water for drinking – that is, water free from chemical and biological pollutants. The S stands for Sanitation, specifically access to a toilet (latrine) that safely separates human excreta from humans. The H stands for Hygiene, specifically focusing on public health and the transmission of faecal-oral diseases. WASH replaced earlier approaches, in the early decades of development, which began by focusing on water provision, followed by the addition of sanitation, referred to as WATSAN. The move to the language of WASH signals a wider agenda, recognising the need for a range of complementary political, economic and socio-cultural changes and measures needed in addition to services and infrastructure, to realise the ultimate goal of WASH: human health, wellbeing, and development.

While WASH is intensely personal, as suggested above, it is also about power, inequality, development, and social justice. On the eve of World Water Day in 2013, more people possessed a mobile phone than a toilet (see <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44452#.WVD2eevyvct>, last checked 29 June 2017). Global access to WASH has improved, in particular during the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). From 1990 to 2010, mortality from diarrhoeal diseases fell by 41.9 per cent, from 2.5 million to 1.4 million in 2010 (Lozano *et al.* 2012). However, this story masks another, of lack of progress in particular regions. Unimproved sanitation and unimproved water remain among the top 12 risk factors in most of sub-Saharan Africa, where diarrhoea remains a leading killer (Liu *et al.* 2012). In 2015, as the MDGs gave way to the new era of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 663 million people - 1 in 10 - still lacked access to safe water, while 2.4 billion people still lacked improved sanitation facilities (UNICEF/WHO 2015, 4).

Social taboos around excretion and body waste exist the world over, and embarrassment – even disgust – discourage discussions pointing up the urgency and injustice of the issues. The people who lack water and sanitation usually live lives and die deaths

away from the gaze of the powerful. If they become ill, or die, due to unmet WASH needs, this can go relatively unnoticed to those of us fortunate enough to be able to drink and wash in clean water supplies, and relieve ourselves using modern toilets which channel our waste away from us before we even have to see it, let alone work out how to dispose of it without exposing ourselves or others to the risk of infection, embarrassment, or violence due to stigma.

Writers in this issue offer perspectives on WASH from the point of gender justice and women's rights. They highlight the importance of WASH provision for women and girls, in their own right and as carers for families and communities. WASH is a human right, and a key to women's empowerment. In the next section of this Introduction, we examine the gender aspects of WASH in more detail, before moving on to consider current policy and programme approaches to WASH that aim to address women's and girls' needs and interests.

WASH: a gender analysis

Women and girls experience sanitation needs differently from men. The powerful taboos and stigmas connected to defecation or urination mentioned above are common in human societies, and create secrecy, shame, and disgust around excretion. These obviously affect everyone. However, women's bodily functions are commonly associated in patriarchal societies with a requirement for privacy and the notion that body functions should be kept secret. Women who do not manage to achieve this are often punished, sometimes with violence. The two sets of ideas and beliefs about excretion and female bodies intersect to create particularly acute problems for women in households and communities without water and sanitation. While men may be able to relieve themselves with relative ease and will not face major reprisals if they are seen doing so, the picture is very different for women.

In their article in this issue, Seema Kulkarni, Kathleen O'Reilly, and Sneha Bhat give a vivid account of the sanitation-related violence and harassment of women in slum areas of two Indian cities, Pune and Jaipur. This article paints a vivid picture of women's and girls' daily struggle of finding somewhere to defecate in Indian slums and highlights that even where toilets are present, the high numbers of users and lack of cleaning leave them unusable. For women, the experience of open defecation is made worse by the harassment and abuse they endure from men and boys.

Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and its aftermath, and female menopause all create needs for water and sanitation that are specific to women, and these specifically female bodily functions create hygiene, health and wellbeing problems that can affect women and girls in a range of ways. In their article in the issue, Shobhita Rajagopal and Kanchan Mathur focus on the experiences of adolescent girls in Jaipur, Rajasthan. As they state:

The onset of menstruation, and the practices associated with it, are areas shrouded in silence across many cultures in South Asia; yet they bring many challenges. On the one hand, puberty is a period of rapid transition for adolescent girls, and a critical time for identity formation; on

the other, prevailing patriarchal ideologies, cultural taboos and traditional practices exclude women and girls from various activities including school attendance, reinforcing gender inequalities.

(Shobita Rajagopal and Kanchan Mathur, 304)

Menstruation is commonly associated with pollution, and many societies worldwide see it as a reason for excluding and segregating women from family and community life for a week or more, each month. Some women are expected in some communities to remain within their homes, or in a special room, and there are taboos on handling and preparing food. Rituals may be required to purify them afterwards. The cloths used during menstruation need to be concealed from men and boys and often also from other women and girls, and washed in secret.

Unmet WASH needs add to the dangers of childbearing for women in poverty in the global South. A recent World Health Organisation (WHO) study reviewed data on the estimated 287,000 maternal deaths that occurred between 2003–2009 – most of which were avoidable (Say *et al.* 2014,323). Globally, 10.7 per cent of maternal deaths were related to sepsis (infections that can be cut drastically by hand-washing on the part of midwives and health staff). These sepsis-related maternal deaths were almost all in developing countries, and the proportion of such deaths was highest in southern Asia, at 13.7 per cent (*ibid.*, 328). The study highlighted the importance of focusing beyond the technical aspects of WASH – the provision of water and sanitation services and infrastructure – to the social factors (including attitudinal change and health education) needed to deliver WASH for all.

In addition to experiencing their own personal needs for WASH, women shoulder responsibility for the WASH needs of others. The gender division of labour in most societies worldwide puts women in charge of ensuring family wellbeing, health and hygiene. The burden that accompanies this responsibility is immensely heavier in households and communities without clean, safe, accessible and affordable water and toilets. For women in poverty, the modern machines that have lightened the work of laundry are unaffordable. Yet the modern economy is centred on the idea of a paid worker who is available to do their job for eight or ten hours a day – or more. Unpaid care work presents a practical barrier to all such dreams. In 2014, the immense workload associated with unpaid care – including WASH - was highlighted as a human rights violation by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, because:

The unequal distribution, intensity, and lack of recognition and support of unpaid care work undermines the dignity and autonomy of women caregivers and obstructs the enjoyment of several human rights – including economic, social, cultural and political rights – on an equal basis with men.

(Sepúlveda Carmona and Donald 2014, 444)

A recent study of 24 sub-Saharan African countries estimated that 13.54 million adult women (and 3.36 million children), spend more than 30 minutes each day collecting water for their households (Graham *et al.* 2016, 2). Lack of sanitation for an entire household places the onus on women as carers to protect their children from the insecurity of

open defecation – in particular, daughters; the women in Seema Kulkarni *et al.*'s study, mentioned above, stated that they feared for their daughters' safety more than their own, and accompanied them when they needed to visit open defecation sites.

WASH also affects women carers when family members fall ill from avoidable water-borne diseases. The figures given at the start of this article speak for themselves about the workload and emotional anguish felt by women caring for family members suffering from water-borne diseases. In their article in this issue, Simone E. Carter, Luisa Maria Dietrich and Olive Melissa Minor focus on the lessons to be learnt from Oxfam's Ebola response. The social and cultural dynamics driving the Ebola outbreak concerned women's role in caring for the ill, the dying, and the deceased, including the social expectation that women perform the rituals of preparing bodies for burial:

... the research showed that the social expectation that families would care for their loved ones during life and observe cultural practices of care for bodies after death created undeniable risks for those involved in overseeing and delivering care, particularly for women. A 'good' mother or wife was seen as one who cared for and provided for the sick, however in Ebola she was explicitly told not to provide care and, in fact, told that providing care for the sick and deceased increased risk to the outbreak and its spread. This was because they are more likely to come into contact with bodily fluids or blood which is the primary method of transmission.

(Simone Carter, Luisa Maria Dietrich and Olive Melissa Minor, 211)

The time spent by women carers shoring up family wellbeing and health in the face of unmet WASH needs could be used in many ways. It prevents education, earning income, taking part in politics, or sleep. Leisure is often non-existent. In addition to the time that reducing the drudgery associated with WASH would save, it would benefit women's physical and psychological health. WASH labour is heavy labour. In a study of six communities in South Africa, women and children carried water weighing an average of 19.5 kilos over an average distance of 335 metres. Sixty-nine per cent reported spinal pain, with the potential to lead to muscular-skeletal disorders (Geere *et al.* 2010, 1).

This analysis shows that unmet WASH needs affecting women's daily lives also perpetuate gender inequality and women's subordination. Down the decades, the WASH sector has engaged with these issues in a range of different ways.

WASH programming to support women's rights and gender justice

In their article in this issue, Julie Fisher, Sue Cavill and Brian Reed take a historical look at the evolution of WASH's approaches to women and gender from the vantage point of the papers submitted over the years to the Water, Engineering and Development Centre International Conference, now in its 40th year. They offer a fascinating account of how the WASH sector has been influenced by the parallel development of the fields of Women in Development (WID) and – later - Gender and Development (GAD).

Julie Fisher *et al.* point out particular milestones in the journey to achieve water and sanitation for all. These include the 1977 United Nations Water Conference at Mar del Plata, the 1981–90 International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade, and the International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin, held in January 1992.

The Dublin Conference paid direct and explicit attention to women's key and central role in providing, maintaining, managing, and protecting water. Agenda 21, which came out of the Rio Conference on Environment and Development, recognised the role of women in water management (see the Rio Declaration, Chapter 18). The International Decade for Action, 'Water for Life' (2005–2015), called for women's participation and involvement in water-related development efforts.

The start of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has marked an intensified focus on water, sanitation and hygiene: by 2030, Goal 6 aims to 'ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all'. Target 1 is 'universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water', and Target 2 is 'access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations'¹.

The SDG challenge to 'leave no-one behind' has been taken up in the WASH sector, through its commitment to universal provision of water. But to do this by the deadline of 2030 would be a gargantuan task even if SDG 6 had fewer limitations². The SDGs have built on, and developed, an awareness of the links between complex inequalities and poverty. Leaving no-one behind in WASH – and responding to the related current 'equity and inclusion' agenda (discussed by Julie Fisher *et al.* in their article) will involve involving women in planning and programming. It means adopting a rights-based approach – including women's rights and gender justice as key intersecting components (Gosling 2010).

Parallel to these milestones in WASH policymaking, WASH practitioners in development and humanitarian organisations have also found their work shaped by the impetus to integrate gender issues into their work in response to calls from women's movements since the 1970s. Julie Fisher *et al.* trace how Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) approaches have been taken on in the WASH sector.

Since the early days, awareness of needing to design infrastructure and technology to meet the needs of women has grown in the sector. Often, this has focused on security, in response to the realities of the harassment and violence women and girls can face when using WASH facilities. Programmes have involved women in planning, implementation and running of WASH facilities, in both development and humanitarian sectors, in villages, peri-urban slums, and camps for displaced people. The underlying rationales vary. Some programmes focus on efficiency and meeting the needs of children, families or communities, drawing on women's knowledge, skills and energies but not challenging or seeking to change existing unequal gender roles or workloads.

But as understandings of the link between power and economic poverty have strengthened, programming has grappled with the question of how WASH provision links to women's empowerment and gender equality. Today, as Julie Fisher *et al.* remind us, women's empowerment has become widely accepted as a legitimate, and important, goal in WASH programming. Involving women at all levels of programming is seen by many local, national and international NGOs as important not only because it makes it more likely that projects will be useful and sustainable, but also because this potentially shifts attitudes to women leaders in their families and communities.

Articles in this issue focus on a range of topics, and demonstrate how development and humanitarian WASH programming has addressed gender equality and women's rights.

Women's voices on the right to water: governance and accountability

Women living in poverty remain distanced from any power to influence – let alone decide – water policies. Issues of governance and accountability are critical if policies and practices are ever to reflect the realities of the poorest women.

Kaveri Thara's article provides a case study of a context where the notion of the right to water has been contested for nearly three decades, and where women living in extreme poverty are asserting that it should be the state, not private households, who should pay. This study of resistance to cost-recovery strategies in water provision in Bangalore demonstrates that the poorest people are actually forced to pay more for water than the better-off. Women are marginalised from policymaking.

Kaveri Thara's article focuses on Bangalore where (as in other cities in the global South and North, decision-making on water provision remains largely top-down, and involves technical experts and specialists. There is little involvement of the poorest women and men who are most affected by state decision-making as they are least capable of turning to the market to meet water supply and sanitation needs. Women and men living in poverty have few means beyond protest to articulate their views. After protests failed to stop the city moving to cost recovery, women have retained their vision of universal WASH, which rests on free access and notions of social justice:

Women continue to see water – and claim it - as a public good, something they have a right to, by virtue of having life, and by virtue of their poverty. This response needs to be contextualised within a long history of water provision that acknowledged their human right to water, by providing the poor with public taps.

(Kaveri Thara, 263)

One strategy women in Kaveri Thara's study have adopted to subvert the system is to use social relationships with local government officials, who hope for continued political support in return for negotiating for access for free water from public taps that are now locked.

In contrast, several articles in this issue focus on the ways NGOs have involved women in the planning and governance of WASH interventions that have a conscious focus on reaching the poor. In locations where NGOs have taken on the role of WASH provider, they have typically involved communities in infrastructure and service provision, often using participatory planning methods. As Julie Fisher *et al.* mention in their article in this issue, gender analysis tools and frameworks – many of them for emergency programming including WASH – evolved through the 1980s to 1990s, as gender mainstreaming in development gathered pace. The tools and frameworks aimed to provide details of gender roles and relations in communities, and to involve women in the design, implementation and evaluation of WASH programming.

Also in this issue, Caitlin Leahy, Keren Winterford, Tuyen Nghiem, John Kelleher, Lee Leong, and Juliet Willetts present the results of empirical research conducted in Central Vietnam in 2016 into WASH initiatives. In particular, the authors were interested in assessing the impact of a Gender and WASH Monitoring Tool (GWMT), developed by Plan International Australia and Plan Vietnam. In this article, they provide an example of how this was used to shed light on changes reported by women and men of different ages and ethnicities who were affected by WASH projects, and consider the reasons for the changes. Their article – and the tool they discuss – draws on a range of gender-analysis concepts, and uncovers changes in gender relations and power dynamics at both household and community levels. This helps explore the extent to which both the practical interests of women, and the goal of gender equality, can be influenced and changed by WASH policies and programming.

Simone E. Carter *et al.*'s article also offers insights into gender, governance and accountability in the fragile context of the Ebola response in West Africa. They show how careful and detailed research involving women is essential to ensure effective and empowering responses to WASH needs in humanitarian crisis. However, their case study shows how an emergency response in a fragile context where government is struggling can become top-down and less participatory at the precise moment that local knowledge and buy-in becomes critical. In the Ebola national response, a male-dominated and militarised response prevented women's voices being heard.

Empowering women through WASH: understanding what this means

In 2017, many WASH programmes now have a gender equality or women's empowerment aim. Yet understanding of what empowerment looks like, how to support women to become empowered, and what the scope is for WASH to promote this, remains patchy. In many development organisations, there is an expectation that knowing how to work on 'gender' or 'women' is widely understood. However, the ways WASH can achieve this deserves more open discussion than it sometimes receives in organisations where gender mainstreaming is now a requirement. In the process of editing this issue of *Gender & Development*, the notion of empowerment was used in many different ways in discussions between the editors and authors. It seems that WASH practitioners can commonly feel that they are expected to take women's empowerment as a given, and know how to do it (personal communications, May 2017).

Understandings of what women's empowerment is, who defines it and how it is supported by development and humanitarian actors have been many and varied. As Julie Fisher *et al.* trace in their overview of gender mainstreaming in the WASH sector, a concern for the sustainability of water and sanitation programming, and the role of women in ensuring this, has been accompanied by a commitment to ease women's workloads, increase their ability to produce and earn money as a result of water provision, and ultimately to empower women through WASH. The idea that a WASH programme can contribute to change in gender relations in wider society is also commonly mooted by gender specialists working alongside WASH practitioners. But how can this happen?

As the articles in this issue show, examining WASH from a gender perspective involves extending the gaze beyond the important technical concerns of services and infrastructure to focus on social relations: in particular, thinking about power. Without the power to secure essential resources including access to water, sanitation and the ability to practice good hygiene, both personal and domestic, human agency is constrained and there can be little meaningful human achievement. Women and men without power to obtain water and sanitation are trapped in a vicious circle in which it is hard to see how they can move forward in any substantive way. WASH is thus intrinsically empowering. The challenge is to ensure all can gain access to it – that no-one – and in particular, no woman – is left behind.

However, the language of empowerment has become ubiquitous, and in many cases means little. Gender and development's understanding of women's empowerment originally came up from global women's movements in the 1980s and 1990s, and was founded on a vision of Southern women's right to define the concept for themselves (Moser 1993). In this original vision, there was a clear - and limited - role for development organisations. While they could offer financial support, technical input, and other support as required and requested by women in the global South, development organisations were not free to impose an outsider agenda and activities.

Yet programmes with an empowerment aim often do impose on women at the grassroots. SDG 6 has a target on protecting and restoring water eco-systems, and Anne-Marie Hanson's article on this topic focuses on women's environmental activism around waste and plastic pollution. She highlights that while women's participation and the 'needs of women' can be a central component of project or programme design, the power dynamics are often not empowering. There is little evidence that such programmes actually benefit women, or allow them to do more than just 'participate' by being 'recipients of an intervention'. Too often, we use the language of empowerment, but still expect women to take on passive roles.

Empowerment and WASH in the era of 'leave no-one behind': Gender 2.0

Currently, the UN's 'leave no-one behind' approach, with its emphasis on the link between complex inequalities and marginalisation, is creating real impetus for development practitioners to focus freshly on power and empowerment (Mangubhai and Capraro 2015). A host of inequalities – e.g. race, caste, disability – encourage an analysis of how people are marginalised for many different reasons. But 'leave no-one behind' does *not* mean a departure from the global commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment³. Instead, it means a shift to what could be called 'Gender 2.0': the empowerment of all women and girls, including those marginalised by other aspects of identity, for example caste, race, or being lone heads of household.

For WASH practitioners focusing on gender inequality and women's empowerment, this means working with women in a community to find out who is most marginalised, why, and a commitment to working with women to design and implement WASH programmes that benefit everyone. In their article, Stephanie Leder, Floriane Clement, and Emma Karki provide a case study which shows the importance of doing this. They

focus on research findings from four villages in Western Nepal, where two internationally-funded WASH programmes specifically aimed to empower women, by improving access to water for both domestic and productive uses.

As the article shows, the programmes had the ambitious aspiration of transforming women into rural entrepreneurs and grassroots leaders. However, impact assessment showed how the work had benefited some women more than others. Differences in identity and power relations between women – depending on issues including age, marital status, caste, and household prosperity - led to some women being able to take advantage of the WASH programmes more than others. There is a clear message that water programmes must recognise and address difference between women if the poorest and most disadvantaged women are to benefit. While these insights are not new, the focus on ‘leave no-one behind’ challenges WASH practitioners to design programmes designed to empower the most marginalised.

Caitlin Leahy *et al.*'s article, mentioned above, offers evidence of how age and ethnicity alters individuals' experience of a particular intervention aimed to support all of them equally. This reminds us of the limitations of focusing on a single category of ‘women’, and/or a focus only on gender inequality. Projects need to focus on difference among women, and ensure that the more marginalised among them are able to secure the fullest benefits of WASH.

Universal WASH access: the challenge of financing

Achieving universal WASH coverage involves challenging the complex economic, social and political inequalities that constrain the poorest people from accessing WASH, ensuring that WASH is affordable for all. It will also involve devising ways of financing WASH which ensures it can reach the poorest women and men, ensuring that the universal right to water is realised. This will require the costs of providing WASH to be correctly calculated and covered, including operations and maintenance of systems and administration; finding capital at affordable rates to invest in infrastructure suitable to reach the hardest-to-find people living in rural isolation and urban sprawl; and finding the knowledge, expert skills and input to invest in the sector.

As the challenges of financing WASH are addressed, poor women are rarely if ever included in these discussions. Solutions tend to worsen their situation as primary collectors and users of water. In her article, Kaveri Thara focuses on women living in poverty in an urban area of Bangalore, tracing their struggles to obtain water in the face of evolving policies on water provision. Despite recognition of the right to water, the issue of cost and affordability is critical here as elsewhere. The poorest, both rural and urban, are often adversely affected by failures in infrastructure provision and are less able to access the services provided by infrastructures when they are available, with affordability highlighted as the key determinant to access (Estache and Fay 2007, Briceno-Garmendia *et al.* 2004).

As Kaveri Thara's article shows, in contexts with strong histories of rights-based development and liberation, women at the grassroots are resisting the monetisation of water in principle, while in practice their need for it requires them to scrape together the money to

buy it. While the advantages of the technologies that accompany this process are emphasised by the authorities – piped water is seen as saving time and increasing mobility, as well as delivering a higher-quality resource – women retort that the requirement to pay for water outweighs benefits. City authorities need to be accountable to all, including women in poverty.

A complementary article in this issue comes from Cat Button, who examines a solution to water shortages in urban Mumbai that focuses on a technology to be purchased by the better-off city residents. This is rainwater harvesting, undertaken at the level of individual households. As the article points out, this solution to water shortages shifts responsibility for water provision from city authorities to private households. While it can be ‘sold’ as giving residents more control, and could also change the gendered power balance of water provision by ending the need for women to collect water, these benefits need to be balanced against the fact that poor households are not able to adopt rainwater harvesting. As Cat Button points out, power, gender inequality and environmental justice are central to WASH provision.

Learning what works in WASH programming

Learning from programmes still continues to be a challenge in many development and humanitarian organisations, requiring significant investment of resources to do properly, and a receptivity to reflecting critically on the challenges of programmes. The article by Simone E. Carter, Luisa Maria Dietrich and Olive Melissa Minor in this issue focuses on Oxfam’s learning from its work in the Ebola Crisis of 2014–5. This case study highlights a range of issues which staff involved in Oxfam’s response considered the most important to learn from for future interventions. These were the militarised nature of this large-scale response to Ebola, in countries where health and other systems were struggling; the limited participation of women and other traditionally-marginalised groups in the planning and implementation of the response; and the impact of a narrow gender mainstreaming lens on programme effectiveness, leading to a focus on women and unpaid care work at the expense of a wider approach incorporating the roles of men and boys. In Oxfam, a sound gender analysis was provided by a team of professionals from a range of technical and social development backgrounds. This analysis provided a foundation for an appropriate and effective response.

This article also highlights the importance of comprehensive gender equality standards in WASH humanitarian response, but argues that even these cannot deliver the best possible programming. To do this, emergency responses are needed that are informed by a robust body of gender mainstreaming guidelines. These can address gender issues arising in specific contexts, and enhance women’s participation in WASH emergency programming.

This article is a case study of one particular organisation’s specific work in contribution to the wider Ebola response, but stepping back to widen the focus to the whole response (involving UN agencies, governments, and international NGOs) is important also, to give a picture of progress on gender mainstreaming at scale. A key issue highlighted by gender specialists working in emergencies relates to the current humanitarian co-ordination

system (where ‘Clusters’ of organisations have specific lead roles in co-ordinating a response). There is a WASH cluster (led by UNICEF), but there is not a specific Cluster leading on Gender, and awareness of and appreciation of the importance of gender mainstreaming is left to the individual organisations within the Clusters.

Breaking the silence and working on social norms

As a sector, WASH is evolving a growing understanding of the importance of the social and cultural contexts in which people use water and sanitation. The ‘H’ of Hygiene in the WASH acronym reminds us that WASH is as much about health education and working to challenge social norms that harm health and hygiene as it is about services and infrastructure.

Simone Carter *et al.*’s article on Oxfam’s Ebola response provides an extreme example of the sensitivities that can exist around social norm change. As stated earlier, WASH may be connected to rituals of life and death. The women wishing to bathe the bodies of their loved ones had to choose between obeying a health message asking them not to, or risking continuing spreading Ebola by ignoring this message. Questioning – let alone challenging – ideas and beliefs seen as ‘common sense’ in societies worldwide is a sensitive area.

Since the start of this current decade, the WASH sector has developed its work around women’s gender-specific WASH needs that arise from discriminatory and stigmatising social norms around female bodies. As highlighted above, gender-specific WASH issues remain extremely hard to voice even to female relatives or schoolteachers, let alone to male relatives, or men outside the family. Yet the details of how women and girls negotiate through these challenges each day and month of their lives, and how their requirements for WASH change over their lifecycles and prevent or enable them to participate in activities outside the home – critically, in formal education or in paid employment or income-earning – need to be a critical part of WASH planning and provision. This information needs to be known to policymakers in the institutions that provide WASH services and infrastructure.

In their article, Shobhita Rajagopal and Kanchan Mathur discuss a state-sponsored intervention to promote menstrual hygiene through the provision of sanitary pads to schoolgirls. Their discussion reveals the inadequacy of this response in a context of gender inequality, stigma around menstruation and women’s bodies, and poverty. While the provision of ‘modern’ sanitary protection may be welcomed by many, the affordability of modern technologies is an issue, as is the need for health and relationships education, and work with both young women and young men to challenge the gender inequality that lies behind attitudes to women, women’s bodies, and sex. A narrow focus on ‘menstrual hygiene’ is not sufficient to ensure girls’ experience of the onset of menstruation is positive, nor to fully address the issue of girls being able to move around outside their homes (attending schools or indeed earning income).

A final point on social norms concerns the need for professional knowledge from many different fields, to ensure the ‘H’ in Hygiene is delivered. Focusing on social norm change relating to women’s care load, including water collection and sanitation, is obviously something that can be done as part of a WASH sector response, but may draw on the expertise of

colleagues from different backgrounds, as in Oxfam's Ebola response. WASH is a complex field which needs to bring together the combined expertise of grassroots women and men, with the engineers, architects, city planners and other professionals tasked with delivering WASH services and infrastructure. WASH also requires other disciplines, including community development workers involved in health education, sociologists and gender specialists. This can ensure a holistic programme that addresses social norms alongside technical water and sanitation infrastructure and service provision. Challenging the notion that unpaid care is women's work and suggesting that men can also do it is a key and important element of all programming aiming to support women's empowerment.

Partnership with women's organisations in their WASH-related action

The personal and daily connection between women and the natural environment created by the constant struggle to obtain water and ensure good health and hygiene for families has led many women to become custodians of natural resources. Household and residential garbage management is largely seen as an issue of cleanliness and health, linked to women's domestic responsibilities.

In her article in this issue, Anne-Marie Hanson focuses on these issues in the context of an exploration of women's environmental activism around waste and plastic pollution, in Coastal Yucatán, Mexico. In the small coastal communities in Mexico in this article, women have assumed many of the responsibilities for improving urban conditions and preventing water-borne diseases through community-based organised waste management and education activities.

Anne-Marie Hanson shows how this activism, centred on sustaining everyday lives in the absence of formal policymaking to protect natural resources and meet needs for rubbish collection, water provision and sanitation, is often invisible to planners who focus on large-scale technical development programming, in which women are seen as passive beneficiaries. Women in poverty are even less likely than men to have a significant say in the decisions about the positioning and design of homes, settlements, and infrastructure.

As we have seen, in the WASH sector, the struggle to provide WASH infrastructure and services is leading to partnerships between the state, NGOs and private sector institutions. However, the idea of partnerships with social justice movements – including women's movements – is an innovative and promising idea that offers the promise of real change. Rights-based development based on equity and inclusion requires inviting women's organisations into WASH policymaking and planning spaces. In Anne-Marie Hanson's article, in the small towns all along the coast of Yucatán, women are the main advocates for community waste management, forming grassroots recycling and composting groups, as well as inter-municipal garbage alliances.

Conclusion

The articles in this issue aim to offer a range of interesting and challenging views on key challenges to achieving universal access to WASH by 2030, and to give examples of the

many ways in which the WASH sector has grappled with the challenge of integrating gender equality and women's rights into this most critical of development and humanitarian sectors. Over the past four decades there has been increasing acknowledgement that it is social and political marginalisation and complex inequalities – including gender inequality – that drive apparently economic and technical deprivations. This has not only created a different and more accurate analysis of the causes of the problems, but also suggests a set of strategies which are more likely to bring about sustainable solutions, if the political will is there to implement them.

Notes

1. For further and more detailed information on Goal 6 and its targets, see <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/water-and-sanitation> (last checked 29 June 2017).
2. SDG 6 lacks a headline focus on hygiene, and has targets on water and sanitation only. The SDG indicators remain focused on the technology of service provision rather than the wider and more complex considerations required to deliver water, sanitation and hygiene for all.
3. For a full gender analysis of 'leave no-one behind', see Elizabeth Stuart and Jessica Woodroffe (2016), 'Leaving no-one behind: can the Sustainable Development Goals succeed where the Millennium Development Goals lacked?', *Gender & Development* 24(1): 69–81.

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