

## **Washing away inequality for women and girls in Ethiopia: Including gender-based violence and female empowerment in efforts towards water security.**

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### **Abstract**

Despite significant progress and efforts made to provide primary access to infrastructure and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services in Ethiopia, the problem still lingers, with nearly 34 million people lacking access to a safe water supply and almost 48 million have no access to basic sanitation. Evidence suggests that women and girls are more vulnerable to the damaging impacts of lacking proper access to WASH services due to both increased risk of death due to improper WASH care in processes such as childbirth and cultural norms that disproportionately assign related household activities, a situation worsened by the negative effects of different types of Gender-based Violence. Institutions, development practitioners and other key stakeholders must address gender inequality and all forms of violence against women and girls to properly resolve the issue in the country. Solutions should take a comprehensive approach that involves empowering women and girls and involving them in policy making to attend their specific WASH needs.

### **Introduction**

Safe drinking water, effective sanitation, and adequate hygiene are vital drivers of human health, nutrition, education, and equality (Kwami et al., 2019). Also, access to these services is essential for good health and enables people to make a living, keep their dignity, and fosters school attendance, enabling individual and community development opportunities. On the other hand, untreated human waste pollutes the groundwater and surface water used for drinking, irrigation, bathing, and other domestic reasons, resulting in illnesses like diarrhea. Whether from natural sources like arsenic and fluoride or from human activity like nitrate, chemical pollution of water remains a public health concern. In Ethiopia, nearly 34 million people lack access to a safe water supply, and almost 48 million have no access to basic sanitation. Although Ethiopia has had significant progress and efforts through policies like Millennium Development and Sustainable Development Goals to provide primary access to infrastructure and services such as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), the problem still lingers (Hailegiorgis et al., 2021). WASH challenges affect everyone; however, women and girls are more vulnerable to its impact due to the socially induced gender roles disproportionately assigned to them to perform in WASH household activities such as fetching, cooking, cleaning, and child and elderly care. This unequal affection of men and women raises a question about how Gender-Based Violence (GBV) influences access to clean water and sanitation. GBV, in this case, refers to “harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power, and harmful norms.” (UN Women, 2023). Different types of violence against women and girls, from economic to sexual, are present in the region and severely impact their capacity to access WASH services. There are limited accountability mechanisms for implementing accessible WASH services for all, especially for women and girls, because they are still disadvantaged and underrepresented in WASH service provision in Ethiopia (Bekele et al., 2020). Therefore, this paper argues that Women and girls in Ethiopia face challenges in accessing clean water and basic sanitation facilities which is detrimental to their health,

education, and social-economic development by addressing GBV at different levels and fostering female empowerment in the region, policymakers, development practitioners, and local communities can reduce WASH inequality.

## **Literature Review: Case Study of Ethiopia**

### ***Gender, WASH, and the widespread impact of GBV***

Despite treaties and conventions at the international level acknowledging the critical role of women and girls in WASH, there have been minimal efforts by the Ethiopian governments and policymakers at the state level to mitigate the experiences of violence in accessing inadequate WASH. Thus, there is a need for more research to assess the women and girls' experiences of violence in their access to WASH needs. This will go a long way in mitigating the vulnerability the women and girls must encounter daily. According to (Hailegiorgis et al., 2021), a crucial component of sustainable development is gender equality and social inclusion (GESI). On the same note, the right to use WASH facilities that are secure, improved, and reasonably priced is guaranteed for socially excluded groups both in the public realm and in institutional settings. However, women, girls, and people with disabilities continue to be disadvantaged despite advancements in ensuring everyone has access to WASH services. The Ethiopian government has put numerous efforts to avert the situation and include the disadvantaged groups in the community. This consists of The Federation of Ethiopian National Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FENAPD), which was founded in December 1996 to serve as an umbrella organization for people with disabilities in Ethiopia. The Federation strives to increase public understanding of disabilities. This group organization comprises seven disability member associations (FENAPD, 2021). WASH-related guidelines and strategies are not explicitly mentioned, but there is a gender mainstreaming guideline and an advocacy and communication plan to address inclusion-related concerns.

Moreover, various government and non-government groups are actively pursuing projects to promote the interests of people with disabilities. These agencies are mandated to deal with disabled people's issues. Organizations like the Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD) have prioritization strategies in place for hiring persons with disabilities, creating inclusive spaces for employees of all genders, and achieving and sustaining gender parity. Policies and strategies in various sector ministries seek to advance gender parity and social inclusion in accordance with these constitutional and national frameworks. Priority was given to ensuring that all members of society, especially women and members of minority groups, benefited from Ethiopia's Growth and Transformational Plan (GTP I and GTP II). Later on, GTP II was updated to include the SDGs.

### ***Health Concerns and Economic implication in WASH Access***

Irrefutably, the lack of access to WASH in Ethiopia has detrimental effects on girls as well as women's health and economic well-being. In this sense, women and girls have been disproportionately assigned to WASH management responsibilities, namely water fetching, which reduces their time available for economic activities and leisure. As a result of the long distance, they have to cover in search of water, women, and girls are exposed to negative impacts on their health, which include back pains and even falls from carrying water (Geteneh et al., 2021). On the same note, women spend long hours looking for water sources to inadequate water sources, putting them at risk of sexual violence in along the route. In addition to these hardships in the search for water, women cannot find time to engage in income-generating activities that could help them alleviate poverty (Assefa et al., 2021). Oromia Regional State has

a population of around 35.5 million people, with 82% residing in rural areas, as reported by the Central Statistical Agency (CSA) of Ethiopia (Assefa et al., 2021). This represents around a third of Ethiopia's overall population, or 37.7 percent (Assefa et al., 2021). Water levels in the lakes of the Oromia area, which is part of the Ethiopian Rift Valley, have fluctuated unpredictably during the past two decades due to climate change. As the population keeps growing and the supply of resources decreases, the issue is only expected to worsen.

As per the study, when water must be fetched from far away, men often lend a hand by pulling a cart or donkey (Assefa et al., 2021). Husbands' contributions tend to be greater in a few communities when women are sick, pregnant, or in the early postnatal period. This will depend on how seriously they take the issue of gender equality and how often they gather water for their homes. In most cases, however, women and girls are responsible for water management. Similarly, many girls and women get hurt because they cannot handle the weight of the loads they are asked to carry. In some cases, when women finally reach the front of the line, they often find that the water supply has run dry. Due to the unpredictability of getting water from water points, many homes resort to bottled water, which might be infected and cause illness. Furthermore, women and girls have distinct biological processes that increase their health risks when they do not have access to proper WASH services. Women who give birth in unsanitary conditions, for example, have a higher risk of developing infections which can ultimately result in death. Despite having lowered their maternal mortality rates significantly in recent years, Ethiopia still has a high MMR with 412 deaths per 100,000 births (USAID, 2023). Most of these deaths could be preventable with proper antenatal care, health and hygiene services during childbirth, and adequate postnatal follow-up. (UNICEF, 2021). Likewise, the lack of access to clean water and sanitation also has significant impacts on menstrual hygiene. Many women and girls are forced to use unsanitary materials such as old clothes or leaves to care for their periods, which can cause severe infections and other health complications like urinary tract infections (World Bank 2022). In addition, in many parts of Ethiopia, menstruation is still considered a taboo subject, leading women and girls without the proper menstrual care resources to miss school or work, hindering their development opportunities in this regard (Tadesse et al, 2021).

### **Gender-based Violence and physiological stress**

Women and girls frequently encounter various forms of violence, such as rape, abduction, and other psychological and physical assaults, while traveling long distances in search of water (Nunbogu & Elliott, 2022). According to the research on GBV and WASH in low- and middle-income countries is limited and may not be able to guide actions to reduce risk factors for GBV. Researchers and practitioners in the WASH field need to go beyond the Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) service ladder when assessing and quantifying WASH access. More research on WASH-GBV is crucial for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of attaining gender equality (SDG 5) and guaranteeing access to water and sanitation for all (SDG 6) (Nunbogu & Elliott, 2022). The psychological stress occurs due to the shame, lack of privacy, and indignity they encounter when they must engage in open defecation because of the absence of toilet facilities (Nunbogu & Elliott, 2021).

Similarly, the inadequate WASH infrastructure leads girls and women to adopt risky coping mechanisms such as limiting their water intake and eating to avoid urinating publicly or open defecation (Bekele, Rahman & Rawstorne, 2020). Unfortunately, these unhealthy coping strategies exacerbate adverse health concerns as well as psychological stress. Women and girls are socially and culturally obliged to specific duties at the household level, cooking and washing clothes which require water use. Therefore, this invokes feelings of shame if they

cannot meet these demands. In Ethiopia, a study found that women felt self-unworthy for not being able to provide food on time after hours spent searching for water (Stevenson et al., 2012). This study was done in the South Gondar zone of the Amhara regional state in Ethiopia. Women in the villages under investigation bore most water collection responsibilities, with some assistance from girls and younger children. Women were seen using clay pots (Amharic: ensure) and strapping them to their backs with ropes, while children typically used plastic jugs or jerry cans. This is to imply that water collection was their primary responsibility at the expense of other home chores like cooking.

### **Structural Violence in Water Access**

Women are primarily responsible for water management activities at the household level. However, they are rarely consulted during the design and construction of water points. This often results in negative consequences, including failures in access and safety related to water points. A cross-national WASH study conducted in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Zambia, and Uganda revealed that less than 23% of schools met the World Health Organization recommendations for student-to-toilet ratio for boys and girls (Morgan et al., 2017). The critical water shortage and lack of proper sanitation facilities in households and schools affect girls to miss school due to poor personal hygiene during their menstrual cycle (Sahiledengle et al., 2022). Consequently, girls tend to drop out of school due to poor school attendance and academic performance. The lack of inclusion in the development of WASH facilities and implementation of WASH policies heightens the vulnerability of women and girls to the burden of health, security, and psychological risks.

### **Finding and Recommendations**

#### ***WASH intervention from the government, NGOs, and similar global interventions***

In order to intervene in the problem of WASH, the government of Ethiopia came up with One WASH National Program (OWNP) that aims at facilitating the development of one plan, one budget, and one report for the broader WASH sector with the key government ministries. They include water, Health, Education, Labour, Women, and children, obliged to improve WASH resources and ensure that gender and social inclusion are mainstreamed in the WASH sector (Hailegiorgis et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the Ethiopian government implemented the 2017-2022 Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), which is focused on WASH, inclusion, and the needs of Women. Although, the anticipated results remain behind the targets (Hailegiorgis et al., 2021). Ethiopia's implementation, availability, and proper use of latrines, water, and hand-washing facilities still need to be higher. Therefore, we seek to identify successful global WASH interventions and strategies implemented in other countries that could work in Ethiopia. There is a need to include a broader gender perspective that seeks to diminish the impacts of the different forms of violence against women and girls that positively impact efforts toward water security (Sommer et al., 2015). First, research needs to be conducted to comprehend the breadth of the violence better and WASH vulnerabilities and problems encountered by girls, boys, women, and men in various settings (e.g., urban slums, refugee camps, and rural communities).

Various scenarios involving WASH and violence should be examined, including the dangers of having to travel far to get water, the difficulty that girls and women in periurban slums have in gaining access to sanitation, and the conflicts that might emerge at water collection terminals. Reports further suggest that those from lower social classes or with disabilities are more likely to be victims of violence, so it is essential to investigate this phenomenon further (Girma et al.,

2021). All in all, a more significant amount of documentation is needed. However, it must be done with caution due to the difficulties associated with studying a subject with two susceptible areas: violence and hygiene.

The ongoing conflict in Ethiopia has resulted in political instability exacerbating tensions over competition for resources, and centralized power, culminating in the tragic conflict in the country since 2020 (Halawa, 2022). Thereby inhibiting the government's progressive strides in mitigating Water and GBV issues. Kenya's stable democracy has attracted an influx of NGOs, increasing the donor funding spent on WASH interventions. By 2019, NGOs in Kenya had spent over Ksh 97.7 billion on WASH implementation and intervention projects (NGO Coordinating Board, 2020). These WASH interventions complement the Kenyan government's efforts to build infrastructure, such as toilets, water points, and hand washing facilities, to reduce absenteeism in schools and violence and improve hygiene. Similarly, NGOs in Uganda have accelerated the WASH agenda by funding over 1800 WASH projects (Charity Water, 2020).

## Conclusion

Notably, from an international level, despite women and girls suffering the high risk of violence resulting from inadequate WASH, matters of WASH-related violence are often not prioritized in global policy documents (Sommer et al., 2015). Therefore, the minimal progress of countries, particularly in addressing these issues, particularly in developing countries evident in Ethiopia. More focus on this challenge influence from international actors will demand change at the national level. Nonetheless, the effects of climate change are likely to continue contributing to the rise of violence women and girls encounter. Unfortunately, water scarcity will result in women and girls walking long distances to fetch water, exacerbating violence. Therefore, Ethiopia needs to accelerate also focus on climate change and ensure that the SDGs motto: Leave no one behind is fulfilled (Geere et al., 2018).

Ensuring women and girls access to WASH services in Ethiopia is a complex challenge that requires multi-sectorial intervention. However, the Ethiopian government lacks a confirming binding factor for diminishing the types of WASH-related violence against women. Drawing from the Kenya Constitution 2010, Article 43 highlights the state's mandate to ensure all its citizens have access to safe water and an adequate sanitation standard (Government of Kenya, 2010). This creates a roadmap and practical measures put in place by the government to meet the WASH through partnering with the Ministry of Health, Water and Sanitation to embark on formulating policies, strategies, and frameworks to guide the provision of WASH to all Kenyans. Additionally, in 2010 Kenya shifted from a centralized government transferring resources and responsibilities to the municipal governments to facilitate development, given they are easier to reach the community's needs (Avidar, 2018). The decentralization has paved the way for progress in mitigating the WASH and GBV towards women and girls in the country. However, some authors have argued that decentralizing natural resources also deliberately benefits the rich.

GBV is a human rights violation and a public health challenge. While different authors and findings in this paper have considered how ineffective WASH policies may encourage GBV. It is imperative that the Ethiopian government needs to institute effective policies and strategies discussed to tackle the menace of GBV in WASH. Gender mainstreaming should be used as an effective tool in all WASH policies to disrupt women's unequal power to achieve SDG 5 Gender Equality. Consequently, a gendered approach in WASH will foster the collective action of all genders to shape programs to meet WASH objectives and SDG 3 targets mainly targets 3.1 and 3.2.

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