

# Mainstreaming gender in the WASH sector: dilution or distillation?

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*The way women's issues have been conceptualized and acted on in the context of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) has changed over the past four decades. The discourses and trends in development studies - from the Women in Development approach of the 1970s to Gender and Development in the 1980s - were mirrored in the WASH sector. The WASH sector has contributed to, and been shaped by, debates on women's needs and, latterly, on gender perspectives based on a combined argument for equity and efficiency. In addition, in the last decade, the WASH sector has developed its own distinctive initiatives, such as menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and recently, specific WASH considerations relating to gender-based violence (GBV). This paper assesses whether the result of this sector-specific response has been a dilution or distillation of gender issues. It concludes that the WASH sector has not disregarded the goals of women's empowerment and gender equality; rather, it has contributed to understandings of how resources – such as infrastructure and services - underpin that empowerment. This allows an important recognition of the value and impact of WASH sector priorities and actions for the wider wellbeing of women.*

**Keywords: Women, gender, water, sanitation, equity**

## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) mark an increased level of commitment to water, sanitation and hygiene. By 2030, target 6.1 aims to 'achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all', whilst target 6.2 aims to 'achieve 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*' (United Nations, 2016).

The wording of target 6.2 draws attention to the needs of women and girls, rather than the generic need to consider gender or 'everybody', and is specific in relation to sanitation and hygiene, rather than water. This raises certain important issues. Does target 6.2 echo development theories rooted in the 1970s, reflecting both a desire to assist people to meet their basic needs as well as to promote the potential of Women in Development (WID) perspectives current at that time (Moser 1989)? And/or, is target 6.2's wording based on the notion that that sanitation and hygiene needs of women and men differ, (with attention to menstrual hygiene implicit) whereas the need for water does not? A third possibility is that this reflects greater awareness and recognition of the gendered differences in need for sanitation and hygiene – which also exist for water. Does this target on sanitation represent an important change in direction for the WASH sector, or have we been here before? Is the implication of this that a mainstreaming approach to gender (1) in the WASH sector has failed?

This article examines these issues through the lens of an historical review. It follows the intertwined threads of ideas about women, gender and WASH, and the kinds of development and humanitarian programming that have resulted, relating these to key global events and core publications. The authors are an interdisciplinary group, and we will

draw on our expertise in both social science and water and sanitation engineering, to identify trends from the last four decades of theory and practice. This article reflects the language and priorities of both of these disciplines.

### **Women, gender and WASH: what do we know?**

WASH provision is widely accepted today to have important consequences for women and girls, impacting on their daily wellbeing and status in society, affecting their education, health, income, and safety (Fisher 2006a and 2006b). Examples are:

- Responsibilities for household water collection and management are intrinsically linked to women and girls' domestic role in the household – for example, cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare, and care of the sick and elderly (Boserup, 1970).
- The effects of collecting water on schooling do not impact uniformly on children's education (Doyle 1995). A one hour reduction in the time spent walking to a water source increases girls' school enrolment by 18 to 19 per cent in Pakistan, and eight to nine per cent in Yemen (Koolwal and van de Walle, 2010). Furthermore, the unavailability of effective latrines for girls in schools, with a lack of facilities for appropriate menstrual hygiene management has been shown to impede girls' school educational achievement (Sommer et al. 2015).
- Carrying heavy water loads on the head or back by women and girls is associated with exhaustion, pain, discomfort and musculo-skeletal damage (Hoy et al. 2003).
- Women report that water collection can be a significant source of chronic stress due to pressure to return home quickly e.g. because of outstanding household tasks, anxiety about children left at home alone or husbands' suspicions of the time spent away from the home (Henley 2014). More recently attention to psychosocial stress and sanitation has been investigated in a number of settings (Hirve 2015; Stevenson 2012).
- Although access to WASH is not the root cause of gender-based violence (GBV), inadequate provision and location of facilities can make women and girls more vulnerable to harassment and assault (House et al. 2014).
- As WASH becomes more readily available, it is plausible that women will use the time freed up for income-generation or can create income dependent on water supply (Koppen 1997; Toure, 1988; Joshi and Fawcett, 2001).
- Alternatively time saved by effective WASH provision can be used by women for their own development and empowerment, for example 'taking part in community activities or spending time with friends and family,... boosting personal growth and feelings of self-worth' (Oxfam internal document April 2017). In Morocco, Devoto et al. (2012) found that people did not use the extra time generated by household water connections for productive activities, however, the extra time and the decrease in stress levels (and inter/intra household water-related conflict) related to water collection increased households' self-reported happiness. The time saved did not increase the time family members spent generating income, through working or starting a business, or the time that children spent studying, but households did use the time for leisure and social activities (ibid).
- WASH in health care facilities is critical to maternal and neo-natal health (Velleman et al. 2014).
- Women with disabilities are made particularly vulnerable if they are unable to access WASH (Jones and Reed 2005) and lower-caste women may be excluded even if projects are meant to be gender sensitive (Joshi and Fawcett 2001).

It is clear from the examples that both human biology and gender roles and relations result in women engaging with both water and sanitation in ways that are different from men. This was formally recognised at a global level in the 1992 Dublin Principles (ICWE, 1992) (2) with Principle 3 being 'Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water' (3).

Ideas about women and gender have been addressed in WASH narratives over time in different ways. The context for both the WASH sector-specific focus on women, and the evolution of the field of WID through to GAD, has been a range of broader changes in development and humanitarian thinking and action, notably a focus on appropriate technologies in the 1980s, social development in the 1990s, 'gender mainstreaming' in the wake of the UN Fourth Women's Conference at Beijing in 1995, and emphases on equity and inclusion from the 2000s. The sector has moved from seeing women as beneficiaries, to an instrumentalist focus on women's inclusion in WASH, with women taking an active part in the provision of water, as committee members or mechanics. Interest in women and gender issues in WASH was sparked by the experiences of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD), between 1981-1990 (Narayan 1995).

These ideas evolved into a gendered approach, which looks at gender roles and relations and from there typically focuses on women's role in the household and empowering women. However, latterly the WASH sector has moved back towards more women-centric and individualist approaches.

### **Analysing trends in papers at the WEDC International Conference**

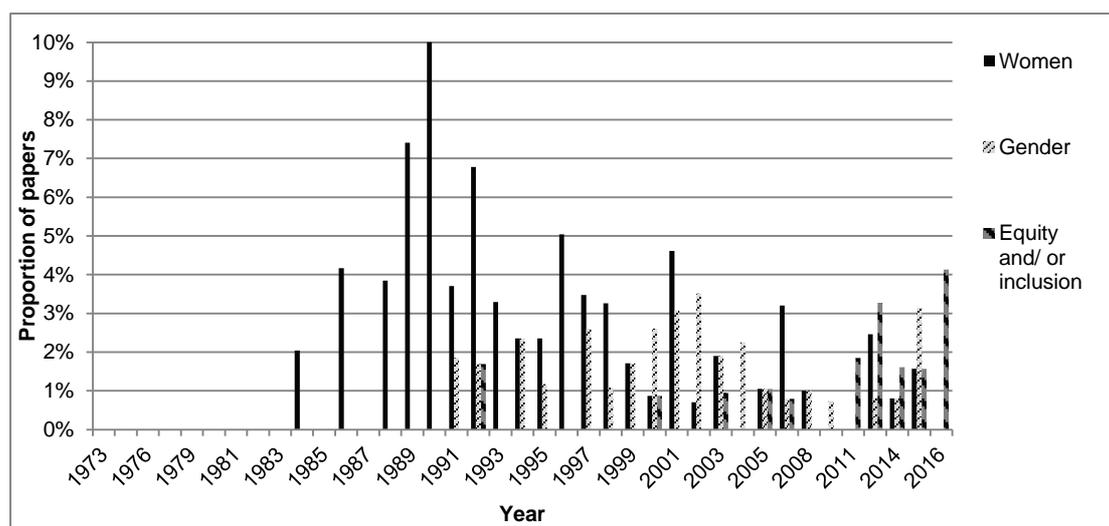
To gain a sense of the changing priorities for WASH and women, we found it useful and interesting to analyse the proportion of papers presented at the annual International Conference of the Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) (4) relating to this topic (see Figure 1). We flag up many examples of these papers in our account here.

The WEDC International Conference is a mixed academic and practitioner conference, covering technical and socio-economic aspects, so reflecting both thought and action in the WASH sector. Although the first conference was held in 1973, it was not until over a decade later that the first paper relating to women appeared in 1984. By the end of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, the number of papers containing the word 'women' in the title peaked at 16 per cent (5 out of 31).

Since then, the proportion of titles with 'women' in the title has fallen, but some of this can be explained in terms of shifts in thinking within the field, leading to changes in terminology. First, the drop in titles with 'women' were followed by an increase in use of the term 'gender', and more latterly, the terms 'equity' and/or 'inclusion', which could either be following general trends (from WID to GAD), moving away from a technical focus on women's needs and roles to a greater appreciation of social aspects based on either wider development trends or the direct experience of WASH projects or it could signal a move to focus on social identities including gender, ethnicity, or caste, (focused on either separately or together as intersecting differences creating complex disadvantage).

The average proportion over the last ten WEDC conferences was four per cent (of about 120 papers presented annually) of these three categories ("women", "gender" and "equity/inclusion"). This is an underestimate however, as some authors do address gender issues or conduct gender analysis, but this is 'mainstreamed' – that is, integrated into their work and

not flagged up explicitly in the title. Examples of words used to implicitly denote gender-disaggregated data or methods focusing on household and community dynamics are, for example, ‘participation/ ‘participative’ or ‘community’. Papers using these two terms have held steady over the life of the conference, comprising about eight per cent. However, the emphasis on gender issues has evolved in these papers over the years, reflecting increasingly sophisticated understandings of differences in community and the gendered dynamics of participation (Guijt and Shah 1998).



**Figure 1. Proportion of WEDC International Conference paper titles containing relevant “gender” keywords (note data for 1990 goes off the scale of the graph)**

With these trends in mind, in the next sections we offer a chronological account of what lay behind them.

### **Evolving perspectives on women and gender issues over time**

#### *The 1970s: Women in Development (WID)*

Women’s experiences, perceptions and roles in WASH became an important area of focus from the early 1970s, in the lead-up to the First UN World Conference on Women in 1975. Debates in this period reflected the influence of second-wave feminism in international development and were based on proliferating studies of gender differences in roles and the connections between these roles and unequal power relations. In particular, the work of feminist anthropologists and feminist economists received increasing attention and led to increasing acceptance of the ideas that women were being either ‘left behind’ by development, and/or included on unequal terms and exploited by the prevailing Western development model. A growing body of research led to increasing pressure from feminists inside and outside international development organisations for governments and international institutions to respond.

From the 1970s, a range of Women in Development (WID) policy approaches (Moser 1989) evolved from a common understanding that women’s experience of development was different from men’s (Rathgeber 1990). Parallel to the development of WID approaches, another very important policy approach of the era that is relevant to how women and gender are addressed in WASH was the Basic Needs Approach (ILO 1976), which sought to

ensure that people had their basic needs met (including WASH). This approach, like the majority of WID approaches, focused on women's work, and justified a focus on women in WASH programming in two ways. First, these approaches emphasise the importance of the gender division of labour in shaping the particular roles of women and men in households and communities and recognise the need for a gender analysis in order to understand women's gendered WASH-related roles and responsibilities. Second, both WID and the Basic Needs Approach often portrayed women as more hardworking, caring, and responsible than men and thus better able to meet their families' basic needs. Both these points led to the conclusion that focusing on women in WASH programmes could be expected to improve the effectiveness of projects, and providing water would specifically benefit women in their caring role.

WASH projects developed in the mid-1970s confirm the tendency to view the collection of water as intrinsically linked to women's role as household managers (Palmer 1977). This was a step forward from WASH programming in which services are typically directed at households, where it was assumed that resources and services are pooled equitably according to need. WASH interventions informed by WID perspectives went further, to focus on support to women in their reproductive role – now more often referred to as 'unpaid care work' (Esquivel 2014) - that is domestic activities such as, water collection, cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare, caring for the sick and elderly, and ensuring the family's health.

Using WID analyses of gender roles, improved WASH, specifically water, programmes were intended as a strategy to ease women's work burdens, enabling them to become more independent economically and participate more actively in community development activities (ibid). Yet the critique of WID for seeing women as an untapped resource WASH projects and programmes in which women were seen largely as an untapped resource (Elmendorf and Isely 1981; van Wijk-Sijbesma 1985 and 1987) . Evidence offered at WEDC International Conferences – including these early papers: Libatique et al, 1994; Shrivastava, 1992; Dotse, 1995 - showed that participation of women could be used to provide skills, resources, labour, and cost-recovery in service delivery for improved projects .

Studies at this time often also focused on the potential of appropriate technology to reduce women's reproductive workload within the household (Kalbermatten et al., 1980; Elmendorf and Buckles 1980). Evidence suggested that the sustainability of water programming – always a challenge - is secured where communities have local ownership, and demand for services as well as the resources, information and incentives to manage them (Roark, 1980). Women featured in an instrumental capacity, as a cost effective means to improve services, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of gender as a 'bolt on' to any agenda.

#### *The 1980s-1990s: a focus on inequalities*

A critique of WID grew out of a concern with the impact of class, gender and social relations for development processes. This criticised both the Basic Needs Approach and WID for their non-confrontational approach (Rathgeber 1990). They were seen as failing to challenge existing patterns of inequality or question the division of labour within households, and instead focusing on how women could better be integrated into development initiatives. Both approaches were critiqued for their focus on the transfer of appropriate technologies as a sole solution to complex issues which required addressing more holistically. Appropriate technologies were presented as the solution to women's domestic workloads, and the time saved was depicted as time to be spent specifically in income generation. This critique called for a different approach that focused on the politics of inequality. Both a Women and Development (WAD) approach and a Gender and Development (GAD) approach were

mooted as successors to WID (ibid). It was GAD which gained currency and signalled a shift from including women in existing unequal models of global development to a focus on gender, race and class-based inequalities and an emphasis on women's right to set the development agenda (Moser 1989).

GAD was acknowledged to be an essentially political approach which was particularly concerned with issues of equity and social justice. GAD proponents argued that the household was a site of struggle, with competing rights and conflicting interests between male and female household members (Sen 1990). A GAD perspective therefore would aim not only to change the design of WASH interventions, but to re-examine the gendered power relations, social structures and institutions that determine women's position in society relative to men. Projects informed by this aim focused on the need to ask women themselves for their own definitions of empowerment, to support women to organize themselves for collective decision making and to gain more economic resources, but also to provide space for movement building and to ensure women in the global South became a powerful and effective political voice. This approach aimed to move the outputs of development programmes and projects away from women as beneficiaries or women as actors, to a broader agenda for social change. Water projects could be seen by some as an entry point for this social engagement.

In 1995, the UN Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, entitled 'Action for Equality, Development and Peace'. This conference produced the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), which talked about the right of women to equality with men throughout the whole life cycle. However, infrastructure and basic services, including water and sanitation, were not a major focus for Beijing (5). The global publicity given to women and gender issues in 1995 was reflected in the choice of theme of World Water Day that year, designated by the UN General Assembly was Women and Water.

Throughout the 1990s, and beyond into the 2000s, the WASH literature focused on women's empowerment in programming (Ivens 2008). However, the WASH rendition of empowerment was narrower than the GAD understandings, tending to focus on the levels of individual, household and collective empowerment that are necessary to ensure sustainable WASH programming (El Katsha and Watts 1993). The shift to the language of empowerment helped to focus programming on the opportunities that participation offers to women's empowerment processes, and this potentially offers scope to build a sense of individual self-confidence and attain the skills and resources necessary for self-reliance. In addition, programmes promoting women's participation and leadership challenged traditional perceptions of women's status, skills and capabilities. In the WASH research of the time, there were many examples where women were trained as handpump caretakers, even if on a voluntary basis (Regmi et al 1999; Wakeman 1995; Baden 1993), and other examples of potentially empowering programme choices which may have had a primary aim of sustainability but could also result in other positive effects for women, as individuals and as a collective marginalised group.

The influence of evolving understandings of development, and global movements for gender equality is reflected in WASH sector research and programming priorities of the time. One year after Beijing, in 1996, the WELL Resource Centre for Water, Sanitation and Environmental Health (known as WELL) was established. The WELL Guiding Principles (WELL 1998, 2) state that 'People matter more than science', and that 'all too often the perspectives and roles of women are ignored or undervalued. We need to understand demand for services from women, men, and children across all social groups before selecting suitable approaches and technologies'. WELL was at the forefront of a number of

equity and inclusion issues in WASH, through its research, teaching, collaborations, and evaluations.

At the end of the IDWSSD in 1990, the Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP) was launched by WHO and UNICEF, to monitor WASH progress at the country level. By presenting disaggregated statistical evidence each year, the JMP demonstrates that the poorest and most disadvantaged people continue to be left behind with regard to access to improved WASH. Findings focusing attention on inequalities based on wealth and geography have latterly been complemented by attention to specific identity groups, such as people with disabilities, and analysis of age groups (for example, WASH in Schools) have been augmented by greater understanding of the fact that individuals experience different inequitable outcomes that change over the life (6). In the same year, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) was established [10], advocating for improved sanitation and hygiene for everyone and facilitating local technical solutions for effective sanitation and hygiene provision (Wakeman 1995).

#### *The 2000s: Gender mainstreaming in WASH*

The focus on gender mainstreaming that emerged from the 1995 Beijing Conference continued in the new millennium, slowly influencing WASH institutions and organisations. The need to ensure development and humanitarian organisations can deliver women's empowerment requires a focus on the culture and ways of working of the organisations themselves. In WASH, strategies included recruiting gender advisers to work with WASH specialist staff in a range of different ways, appointing 'gender champions' to raise the profile of gender issues among staff, and developing conceptual analytical frameworks, strategies, indicators, and other technical guidance to help staff incorporate gender equity issues into their work. WASH programming was adopting additional goals concerned with women and gender issues alongside the core aim of improving or enabling the provision of WASH infrastructure.

Attempts were made to mainstream gender in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that framed global development from 2000-2015. At the start of the new century, the UN Millennium Declaration committed to reduce extreme poverty in its many dimensions. In relation to WASH, MDG 7, focusing on environmental sustainability, included a target included to halve, by 2015, the total proportion of those without sustainable access to safe drinking water, with a target on access to basic sanitation added in 2002. Other targets focused on slums (Target 7.D): was to achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers. MDG 3, the Gender Goal, aimed to: 'Promote gender equality and empower women', but had only one target, to 'Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015'.

Whilst the MDG target on water and sanitation (Target 7.C to halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation) did not explicitly focus on gender, action to integrate women's rights and gender equality into WASH continued and in the year 2000 the Gender Water Alliance was established to promote equitable access to - and management of - safe and adequate water as a basic right for all, recognising this as a critical factor in promoting poverty eradication and sustainability. Also by the early 2000s, equity issues were becoming more routinely included in regional sanitation conferences including AfricaSan (2002) (7) and SACOSAN (2003) (8) addressing regionally-specific challenges to the achievement of universal access.

In 2004, the Women for Water Partnership, involving 100 countries, was established to raise the profile of women in the sector. Partnerships of women's organisations and networks proved an effective way to promote voice and accountability for gender equality and women's empowerment at country, regional and international levels. An example of a national analysis dating from the same period which informed bilateral aid decisions action was the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID)'s Target Strategy Paper published in 2000. It recognised that:

*Women are highly dependent on basic transport, energy, secure shelter, and water and sanitation services to enable them to carry out their economic and social roles. Many of these are often poorly related to women's needs, significantly adding to the costs for women of carrying out their responsibilities and reducing the effectiveness and efficiency of public investment in these areas. Failure in design work to address cultural considerations may severely constrain women's use of sanitation and other facilities. More gender-aware approaches will enable planners, engineers, and managers to bring important gains to economic and social development, as well as making an important contribution to reducing the burden on women. (DFID 2000, 18).*

Established in the 1980s, DFID's Knowledge and Research (EngKaR) programme funded several research projects on gender issues in the management of water projects in the 2000s as well as a subsequent piece of DFID-funded research, titled *Gender issues in the promotion of hygiene and sanitation amongst the urban poor* (2001-2004). This research resulted in a number of outputs intended to help water engineers understand gender issues, and how to apply this understanding to their work (Reed and Smout 2005).

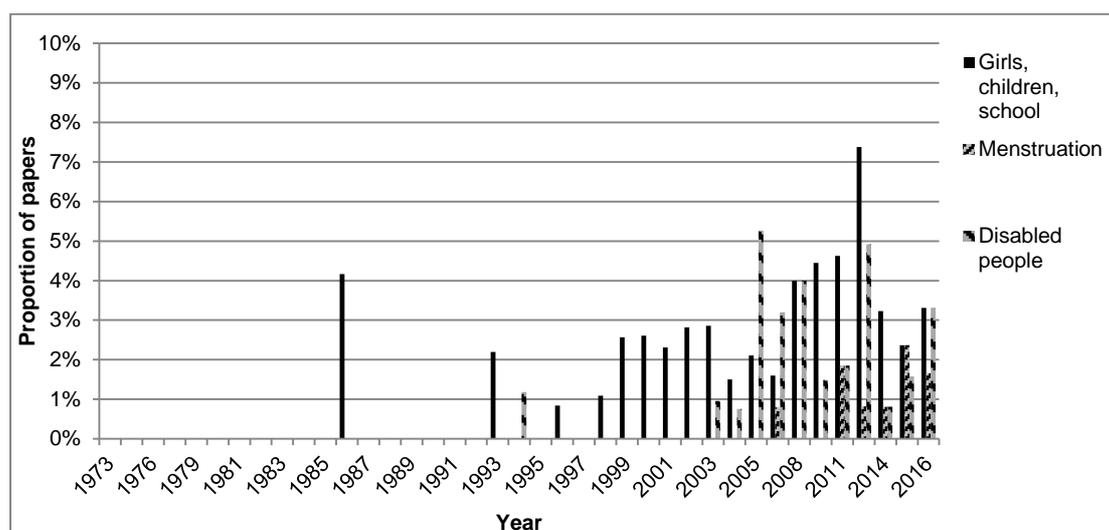
In the 2000s, mainstreaming gender issues within WASH programming became an accepted norm, and conceptual tools and frameworks were developed to help with this. Brian Reed et al. (2007) offered an initial technical response to a social need through practical guidance for engineers, technicians and project managers on how infrastructure can meet the needs of men and women.

At a global level, in 2004, the United Nations established an Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, to galvanize global action on WASH issues. In 2005, as part of the Global WASH Campaign, the WSSCC (Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council) established the *Women Leaders in WASH* programme to support women leaders in Africa to advocate for better services, with material such as 'For Her It's the Big Issue' (Fisher 2006a). This highlighted issues and problems women face, and the need to have women at the centre of decision-making and management of WASH services.

For water, the International Decade for Action 'Water for Life' (2005-2015) launched the United Nations Human Development Report of the same theme (2006), arguing that poverty, power and inequality - not water scarcity - are at the heart of the problem of supply. In November 2006, DFID recognised that safe and affordable water is a right for all. For sanitation, the International Year of Sanitation (2008) aimed to increase attention given to sanitation. The fact that inadequate sanitation affects women in very distinct ways, threatening their safety, privacy, status for example in ways that do not affect men, was recognised more widely at this point. (O'Reilly, 2010; Brocklehurst and Bartram. 2010). The eThekwine Declaration on Sanitation was made at AfricaSan 2008, recognising gender and youth and the importance of involving women at all levels of decision-making.

However, whilst the global agenda on gender was promoting empowerment and decision-making, a new strand appeared in the WASH sector. In 2002, the ground-breaking work of Hazel Jones and Bob Reed on ‘water and sanitation for disabled people and other vulnerable groups’. Although its focus was quite specific, it demonstrated a move to ensure WASH programmes resulted in accessible and inclusive services for all not just women (Jones and Reed, 2005). This had a strong practical element, with clear design guidance as well as programming advice.

In the same vein, in the early 2000s, WELL produced a series of Briefing Notes and 40 fact sheets on a range of equity and inclusion issues including: school sanitation (Mooijman, Snel and Fisher 2004), disabled people’s needs (Jones and Fisher 2005), putting women at the centre of WASH (Fisher 2006b), Gender (Fisher 2004) and HIV/AIDS (van Wijk 2003). Attention on sanitation broadened beyond women, with organisations such as IRC and UNICEF addressing issues relevant to children in schools (Reed and Shaw 2008). This development was mirrored with the topics being presented at the WEDC International Conference, with papers specifically on the needs of schoolchildren, menstrual hygiene management, and the needs of people with disabilities. These resonate with WID approaches that the physical provision of basic services is still required if socially excluded people are to benefit. Whilst the vision of women’s empowerment as founded on women controlling sufficient resources to enable them to take decisions and actions in their lives (Kabeer 1994) through appropriate participation and engagement, the primary, core outputs of these WASH projects are physical infrastructure, not wider social change.



**Figure 2. Proportion of WEDC International Conference paper titles containing relevant “inclusion” keywords**

*The 2010s: equity and inclusion*

This decade has been characterised so far by the WASH sector ‘pulling the scales from our eyes’ with respect to the issues of equity and inclusion (Robert Chambers in WSSCC 2012, 14)– that is, addressing issues of marginalization and exclusion in order to ensure access to safe water and sanitation for all. This has played out in various ways, demonstrating the formal recognition and acceptance by the international WASH community of the importance of a rights– rather than needs-based approach, and its varied impacts. In 2010, WaterAid produced its Equity and Inclusion framework (WaterAid 2010), and since then other agencies have followed suit. Notably, Juliet Willetts et al (2010) reviewed the synergies

between the MDG targets on gender and WASH, even though gender was – as discussed earlier - not a specific aspect of MDG 7.

In 2012, the first Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation linked the notion of stigma to WASH and brought issues of discrimination, degrading treatment, and privacy to the forefront (De Albuquerque and Roaf 2012). Furthermore, WASH for women and girls was a theme for a number of UN reports including both the 2012 and 2013 World Development Reports and in 2015, the UN Water Report was entitled, *Eliminating Discrimination and Inequalities in Access to Water and Sanitation*. In the same year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the human rights to water and sanitation. The Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) monitor whether countries recognize drinking-water and sanitation as a human right in national legislation and reports on a country's commitment to reducing disparity for instance the extent to which equity and inclusion considerations (e.g. population groups that are poor, live in slums or remote areas or live with disabilities) are integrated into policies, plans and budgets.

Significant recent publications by WSSCC are promoting attention to equity and inclusion across the life course, such as *We Can't Wait* (WaterAid, Unilever and WSSCC, 2013) and *Leave No One Behind* (WSSCC and FANSA, 2016) – reflecting the focus of the SDGs on complex inequalities (de Roure and Capraro 2016). At the end of the MDG period, with the SDGs in sight, Working Groups were established (including one on Equity and Non-Discrimination) to propose WASH targets and indicators for global monitoring after 2015 (Satterthwaite, 2012). In 2015, the SDGs were enacted, bringing this account full-circle to the point at which we started.

In addition, during this decade, the WASH sector developed work around women's gender-specific interests and needs. In particular, the concept of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) became visible; menstruation and the particular needs of women that arise from it has until recently been absent from WASH debates – effectively, a taboo subject. The work of Bharadwaj and Patkar (2004) has acted as a catalyst for a very productive stream of work on this theme. Since then, MHM has been acknowledged as a vital concern, demonstrated by guidance manuals (for example, House et al. 2012), and a plethora of research papers (as can be seen in figure 2). Consideration to women's gender-specific concerns arising from female biology has now extended to WASH and the peri-menopause (Bhakta et al. 2014).

In different development and humanitarian sectors, the 2010s has so far been a decade in which the existence of gender-based violence (GBV), in particular sexual violence and violence against women and girls (VAWG), has been much more widely recognised than before. In the WASH sector, *Violence, Gender and WASH: A Practitioner's Toolkit* from Sarah House et al. (2014) takes a sector-specific perspective on a wider gender issue, looking at practical steps that WASH practitioners can take to reduce risks to vulnerable people.

Also over this decade, a life-course approach to programme design has become evident, and this enables specific attention to be given to groups of people made vulnerable by a range of factors. Examples are female heads of households, and their household members (Carolini 2012), people with disabilities, children, elderly people, or pregnant women. The specific interests and needs of women and girls require particular attention in the context of WASH in institutions such as schools and health facilities (Velleman 2014).

New areas of study and action into the factors underpinning vulnerability of different groups are still emerging. For example, the WASH sector is slowly developing a better understanding of how gender identity, as well as sexual orientation, affect the use of facilities, including use of sex-segregated toilets by transgender people, as well as harassment of LGBTI children in school facilities (Coyle and Boyce 2015).

### **Looking back: dilution or distillation?**

Tracing the parallel evolution of women and gender issues and WASH practice over the last four decades reveals a complex picture. Has the process of integrating women and gender into WASH resulted in a dilution of these issues, or a distillation of them? In this section and the following one, we examine what has happened, and look forward to what lies ahead.

It is clear that increased recognition has been given in WASH programming to the importance of gender identity, roles and relations in achieving universal access to WASH. Beyond the focus on gender identity, progress is being made to understand the importance of multiple and overlapping identities of excluded people; some WASH services (such as water) are easier to provide equitably than others (such as sanitation). In line with the SDG commitment to 'Leave no-one behind', WASH programmes are more alert to a variety of markers of difference: socio-economic class, ethnicity, language, disability, income, and stage in the lifecycle. People and issues that were once invisible (such as slum dwellers, disabled people, adolescent girls and menstrual hygiene) are now incorporated into WASH programmes, as a result of the current focus in the sector on equity and inclusion.

These developments suggest a growing divergence between WASH sector priorities and global approaches to gender equality and women's rights, as WASH has adapted approaches to meet its own identified sub groups and sub issues. The broad focus on WASH and women is being sub-divided into more nuanced themes, recognising that women are not a single homogenous group and that needs change over the life course. This does not indicate a neglect of women and WASH, but a more finessed understanding of individuals by the sector and their specific needs related to water and sanitation. The recognition that women have interests arising from multiple identities – that women's interests is a broader category than 'women's gender interests' – is not new in gender and development – it was recognised by Maxine Molyneux as early as 1985 – but the WID and GAD approaches to gender and women in development programming have focused on the gender aspects of their experience, focusing on advancing women's rights as a single category. By practically working with women on the ground means WASH professionals see complex inequalities playing out and excluding particular individuals. 'Gender' has been disaggregated into increasingly specific categories of social exclusion by the WASH sector for pragmatic reasons related to the delivery of water and sanitation services.

The actual work undertaken by the WASH sector in communities is more nuanced. Instrumentalist arguments were typically used in relation to women and gender. Examples discussed earlier included targeting women in their existing gender roles as carers, or to ensure efficient maintenance of WASH facilities. This instrumentalisation of gender issues does appear to have reduced at a policy level and been replaced by arguments focusing on women's empowerment. However the mainstreaming of gender into WASH programmes may have resulted in socio-economic issues such as empowerment and representation being diluted by the need to physically deliver water and sanitation services. Complex, contextual social analysis is difficult to carry out and respond to in a meaningful way within the framework of delivering public infrastructure. However this has been balanced by the

distillation of the underlying gender and social inequalities into practical steps that the WASH sector can deliver successfully to the benefit of specific, recognisable groups. At a project level, indicators of WASH progress do not normally include issues of empowerment, but these issues are not diluted, just concentrated into practical steps that can be delivered successfully.

### Looking forward

We know the importance of good goals, targets and indicators in development, and in the SDGs, the indicators and their ability to deliver progress are all-important. WASH indicators of progress on the provision of WASH need to be chosen that do not just reflect delivery of infrastructure but make a real difference in enabling women's control of WASH resources – understanding this as an essential aspect of women's current and future empowerment. Empowerment indicators focusing on including women in water governance and maintenance were common in development work in the past - such as ensuring that a proportion of women were appointed to a WASH management committee (Dotse, 1995). The current trend towards indicators that make a real difference to women in their current gender role as household carers is important and starts the empowerment process from where women currently are. It is as least as valid from a gender equality and women's empowerment perspective as focusing on women's participation and leadership in infrastructure provision and maintenance. and is more valid from a WASH perspective as it works at the same time and spatial scale as infrastructure provision.

The indicators that are being developed for the SDGs align closely to women's needs as carers for households. Under SDG target 6.1, indicator 45 is the 'percentage of population using safely managed water services ...', where 'households are considered to have access to safely managed drinking water service when they use water from a basic source *on premises*' (SDSN, no date, no page number). By setting the standard for water to be *an on-plot level of service*, the target is inherently and effectively addressing all the issues of the burden of water collection that disproportionately impact on women and girls, but without specifically mentioning this. Target 6.2 will be measured by 'percentage of population using safely managed sanitation services', (ibid) with the type of *household* latrine being assessed. Both these WASH targets will be disaggregated by urban or rural location, but not by gender as the basic unit of assessment is the household. This potentially creates problems for monitoring from an equity perspective. Whilst female-headed households will be included in the target, intra household inequalities could lead to problems accessing sanitation services at household level.

### Conclusion

This article started with an assessment of the WASH SDGs; it is worth comparing these with the gender Goal 5: to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. Whilst the targets for Goal 5 do cover empowerment, decision-making and education, Target 5.4: states 'Recognize and value unpaid care and *domestic work* through the *provision of public services, infrastructure* and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate" (authors' emphasis). This is a recognition that basic infrastructure provision continues to have a role in gender issues; although no infrastructure-related indicator has been proposed under Goal 5 (<http://indicators.report/goals/goal-5/>). The provisions of WASH and other basic resources needed for life are fundamental elements in the empowerment of women and gender equality. The role of basic resources including WASH infrastructure should not be

underestimated or forgotten by the women's movements in their activism and struggles to achieve empowerment of women and gender equality. All development sectors need to work together to empower women and attain gender equality, but they also need to work together to deliver basic services for all, developing sector specific responses to global challenges. The women's movements need to call for empowerment *and* better sanitation.

Integrating gender perspectives by the WASH sector has been critical into their effort to "leave no one behind". The WASH sector has not disregarded empowerment; rather, it has recognized the vital importance of the role of infrastructure in that empowerment. The WASH sector does not have the tools to change society, but it can ensure that the provision of good basic infrastructure services is equitable. Gender issues are being distilled, not diluted.

The authors thank the editor for her contributions, especially highlighting WASH issues and concepts that may not be familiar to the readership of the journal.

### Endnotes

(1) The gender mainstreaming source – the UN 1995 Beijing conference source – **Caroline to add ...**

(2) Dublin Principles – part of preparation for United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992

*Principle No. 1 - Fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment*

Since water sustains life, effective management of water resources demands a holistic approach, linking social and economic development with protection of natural ecosystems. Effective management links land and water uses across the whole of a catchment area or groundwater aquifer.

*Principle No. 2 - Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels*

The participatory approach involves raising awareness of the importance of water among policy-makers and the general public. It means that decisions are taken at the lowest appropriate level, with full public consultation and involvement of users in the planning and implementation of water projects.

*Principle No. 3 - Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water*

This pivotal role of women as providers and users of water and guardians of the living environment has seldom been reflected in institutional arrangements for the development and management of water resources. Acceptance and implementation of this principle requires positive policies to address women's specific needs and to equip and empower women to participate at all levels in water resources programmes, including decision-making and implementation, in ways defined by them.

*Principle No. 4 - Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good*

Within this principle, it is vital to recognize first the basic right of all human beings to have access to clean water and sanitation at an affordable price. Past failure to recognize the economic value of water has led to wasteful and environmentally damaging uses of the resource. Managing water as an economic good is an important way of achieving efficient and equitable use, and of encouraging conservation and protection of water resources

(3) The focus on women in the Dublin Principles, mentioned in the last section, is welcome; while the focus changed around the start of the 1990s from 'women' to 'gender' – at least at the level of the language used to describe policy approaches and programming – and a gender analysis needs to be the starting point of work in any community since gender relations vary according to context. However, critics have suggested that the shift from 'women' to 'gender' risks underestimating the importance of addressing specific issues that women experience in contexts of gender inequality, and that need to be prioritised. The term "gender" also masks issues that relate mainly to women in a physical way, such as menstruation and child birth.

(4) WEDC is one of the world's leading education and research institutes for developing knowledge and capacity in water and sanitation for low- and middle-income countries. WEDC is based in the [School of Civil and Building Engineering](http://wecdc.lboro.ac.uk/) at Loughborough University. <http://wecdc.lboro.ac.uk/> (last checked 3 April 2017).

(5) The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Turns 20 (2015; 53) notes low levels of resources allocated to sectors such as water and sanitation as a major challenge to the full implementation of the Platform for Action.

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1776The%20Beijing%20Declaration%20and%20Platform%20for%20Action%20turns%2020.pdf>

(6) For further information, see <https://www.wssinfo.org/> (last checked 3 April 2017).

(7) AfricaSan, organised by the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW) is a pan-African political initiative intended to promote political prioritization of sanitation and hygiene and attended by Ministers responsible for sanitation and the key agencies working in sanitation and water in Africa:

<http://www.africasan.com/> (last checked 3 April 2017).

(8) The South Asian Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN) is a government led biennial convention held on a rotational basis in each SAARC country, which provides a platform for interaction on sanitation. SACOSANs are intended to develop a regional agenda on sanitation, enabling learning from the past experiences and setting actions for the future: <http://www.sacosanv.gov.np/sacosan> (last checked 3 April 2017).

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