

WOMEN AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS TO WATER AND SANITATION

Interview with our member



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This International Women's Day, HR2W is celebrating women from our organisation by highlighting their work to support the human rights to water and sanitation. Dr. PEDI Obani is an Associate Professor at the School of Law, University of Bradford, and a Visiting Research Fellow in Water, Security, Policy, and Governance at the School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds. She is an Affiliate of the African Academy of Sciences and a Senior Fellow at the Edwin Clark University.

Pedi talks about her experience as a woman working in the WASH sector and in academia. She highlights the importance of having women involved in projects to bring greater perspective to the challenges they face in the WASH sector.

“I AM A STRONG ADVOCATE FOR MULTISTAKEHOLDER MENTORING PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS”

1. WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE GENDER-RELATED PROJECT THAT YOU HAVE WORKED ON?


My favourite gender-related project is a mentoring opportunity that I was involved in, which brought together women practitioners in the water sector and academia. It created an avenue for bringing the so-called theory-practice divide. Also, importantly for me, it was an avenue to acknowledge, curate and celebrate the excellent contributions that women are making in teaching, research and practice on water security, at various levels, from the global to the local. It was also an opportunity to expand our network and learn new skills from our respective practice domains.

During that project, the team members were managing significant personal challenges and caring responsibilities, which ordinarily hamper women’s advancement in various sectors. I missed one of the team meetings because I was in hospital, only a few hours post-partum. But, understanding our unique contexts as women professionals and with a shared commitment to see the reject through, we stood by each other and offered the necessary support. We also had allies who played a vital role, for instance by extending deadlines when the team needed it. I am a strong advocate for multistakeholder mentoring programmes for women and girls in the water sector, having experienced first-hand the value of mentoring and collaboration between women in academia and practice through this project.

“WOMEN AND GIRLS TRAVELLING IN THE DARK TO FIND A TOILET ARE EXPOSED TO VARIOUS FORMS OF PHYSICAL INSECURITY”

2. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TACKLE HUMAN RIGHTS TO WATER AND SANITATION ISSUES THROUGH A GENDER FOCUS?

It is important to tackle HRWS issues through a gender focus as this is a moral and legal obligation on states. Citizens also have a duty to use water and sanitation services and infrastructure in a way that does not limit access and quality for others. Overall, a gender focus makes the implementation of the HRWS more inclusive. One important consideration in this regard is in the design, numbers and locations of water and sanitation facilities. It is not enough to provide services or infrastructure that are not responsive to women’s unique sanitation and menstrual hygiene needs. Women are confronted with the problem of toilet parity quite commonly in public places, and this could be a key determinant of whether women and girls remain indoors or can go outdoors, especially during pregnancy or menstruation.



A gender focus would also highlight critical safety issues affecting women and girls, beyond the technical design of water and sanitation infrastructure. In the absence of accessible facilities within or around their homes, women and girls travelling in the dark to find a toilet are exposed to various forms of physical insecurity (e.g. falls), danger of attacks from wild animals and other forms of preventable violence. Similarly, trying to access water from undisturbed rivers very early in the morning, to ensure cleaner water, may also pose safety risks. There are also concerns about the health implications of lifting and carrying heavy loads of water over a long distance which could affect the back and spine. Also, if women and girls have to set out early in the morning to fetch water from long distances for their personal and domestic uses, this could cause loss of sleep and exhaustion. It also amounts to loss of time that could have been spent on other personal development or productive activities. Implementing the HRWS without a gender focus could mean that women and girls remain left behind, despite the increase in the number and quality of water and sanitation services on average.

“WOMEN ARE UNDER-REPRESENTED IN THE FORMAL WATER SECTOR”

3. CAN YOU TELL US ANY STORIES ABOUT HOW BEING A WOMAN IN THE WATER SECTOR AND IN YOUR COUNTRY OR REGION CAN BE CHALLENGING?

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence about women’s experiences in the water sector, but insufficient gender disaggregated data from most countries. To start with, official records are still focused on the percentage of the population in urban and rural areas with access to water. But there is no indication of whether the recorded progress on water access has been equitable for women and women-headed households.

Second, the available data shows that women are under-represented in the formal water sector. The low representation of women in the formal sector enables prevalent gender stereotypes, e.g. regarding women’s technical abilities, that are already limiting women’s entry into the sector. Women’s underrepresentation in decision making in the sector could impact on the allocation of resources and infrastructure design. Fewer women in the sector also means fewer mentors to inspire and support the next generation of women professionals.

Third, there is a gender pay gap in the sector as women in utilities and other organisations are in some cases paid less than their male counterparts on average. This has wider implications for women’s wellbeing and professional development. Moreover, in the informal sector where women are generally over-represented, they also seem to be engaged in the lowest-paid roles. The women working in the informal sector are vulnerable to health risks, poverty and human rights violation due to poor regulation, compounding gender inequality.

There is urgent need for gender responsive policies that address the entry barriers and creates a supportive environment for women in the water sector. This would require an effective response to a range of systemic issues, including the underrepresentation of girls and women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education, social norms on care giving which affect the productivity of women and girls beyond the home, gender parity in the work environment and decision-making positions.

“WOMEN ALSO BEAR THE BURDEN OF WATER SHORTAGES DURING CONFLICTS, IMPACTING ON THEIR TRADITIONAL CARING RESPONSIBILITIES”

4. THIS YEAR'S WORLD WATER DAY THEME IS RELATED TO WATER AND PEACE, HOW ARE WOMEN ESSENTIAL TO PROMOTING WATER, PEACE, AND SECURITY? DO YOU HAVE ANY EXAMPLES WHERE THIS CAN BE SEEN?

Women have been instrumental in advancing peace and sustainability. There are several examples of women-led environmental justice and social movements aimed at addressing the degradation of water and other natural resources from human and industrial activities. There have also been recent protests over water shortages involving women. Altogether, these efforts show women at the forefront of promoting peaceful co-existence between humans and nature and also ensuring equitable access to water and other environmental resources. Women also bear the burden of water shortages during conflicts, impacting on their traditional caring responsibilities.

It is considered that when women are involved in peace processes, this is beneficial, because the agreements would last. There are therefore deliberate efforts to involve women in preventive water diplomacy and in leadership roles in transboundary water cooperation. As always, for me, it isn't necessarily because women should bear the burden of sustaining water cooperation and preventing conflict. Women are a part of the society, and should be recognised in water governance, peacebuilding and security initiatives, because it is the right and the just thing to do.

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