

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. Carla Toranzo is an active member of HR2W's Expert Committee. She is a Civil Engineer who works as a Senior International Consultant in Water and Sanitation and founder and CEO of the non-profit organisation in Latin America, AGUA GLOBAL.

Carla talks about her experience as a woman working in the WASH sector and the importance of having projects that take on a gender perspective to promote women's involvement in their communities.

“I ENCOUNTERED THE VIBRANT ENERGY OF THE WOMEN IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD”

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

I would say there are several experiences. The first one I worked on while studying Civil Engineering was supervising a project to install household water connections in a neighborhood situated on one of the hills (known as ‘pueblos jóvenes’ [slums]) in the megacity of Lima. These hills are places where poverty is abundant and deeply felt. I used to travel nearly an hour from my university to reach the site, but the real challenge was the uphill climb to the hill, especially on sunny days. Once there, I encountered the vibrant energy of the women in the neighborhood. I knew that it was thanks to them that the project was possible, and their driving force was their families. The goal was to achieve greater well-being for them: fewer illnesses to care for at home due to lack of clean water (such as gastrointestinal diseases), more time to work and earn income for their families instead of spending it on fetching water every day.


This group of women worked in a sewing workshop funded by a Spanish NGO led by a nun. The nun surely prayed a lot, but I believe she worked even harder. The mothers had asked her for help to ensure the neighborhood had access to water, and she accepted the challenge. She secured the necessary resources and set a condition: the residents had to pay for the water, at least a significant amount. The mothers not only catalyzed the tremendous improvement for themselves and their families by making the water infrastructure possible, but they also remained vigilant during the construction and committed to paying for the water. It was a collaborative effort, and they organized themselves effectively.

Throughout my career, I’ve witnessed and confirmed that women play a crucial role in advancing the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, as well as in promoting Sustainable Water Management. Our strong empathy for the challenges we share with other women drives us to be a force for water and well-being for all.

“WOMEN HAVE FIRSTHAND KNOWLEDGE OF THE ISSUES AND OFTEN HAVE VALUABLE IDEAS FOR SOLUTIONS”

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

For various reasons, it is predominantly women who carry out household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and also caring for children, the elderly, and family members who are ill or disabled. In these tasks, water is a fundamental element, and that’s why women are the ones who intimately understand the issues. Whether it’s the lack of potable water, the need to fetch water from distant sources, or purchasing it from water trucks, they are well aware of the challenges. They discuss these problems with their neighbors and begin to think about solutions.



Addressing water-related human rights issues through a gender lens is crucial for achieving equity in access to this right for women. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the daily needs and situations of men and women differ. Women, in their task of collecting and securing water for their homes and families, invest time that they could otherwise spend studying or working to develop themselves. Furthermore, gaps in sanitation facilities or proper bathrooms expose women to infections and diseases due to poor hygiene. Women also face violence due to having to relieve in dark, exposed, and distant places, as well as when having to go alone to fetch or manage water.

In water and sanitation projects, it is essential to ensure equitable participation when interviewing stakeholders because women have firsthand knowledge of the issues and often have valuable ideas for solutions.

“WE NEED TO ENCOURAGE MORE GIRLS TO PURSUE STEM CAREERS, BREAKING FREE FROM STEREOTYPES”

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?

Being a woman in the water sector in Latin America comes with diverse and immense challenges. The water sector is part of the infrastructure industry, which is predominantly managed by men. From the moment one enters this field—let’s say by studying Civil Engineering (I’ve experienced this firsthand, as it was my case over 25 years ago)—the majority presence is male. In my classroom of 50 students, there were only 5 women. Even today, as a professor in the Civil Engineering field, I still observe a significant gender gap, far from achieving parity.

The low participation of women in water management and governance is partly due to their limited representation in education and training for technical and leadership positions within the sector. STEM professionals (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) predominantly dominate this field.

During university studies, we need to encourage more girls to pursue STEM careers, breaking free from stereotypes. The water sector requires their talent, unique perspectives, and different approaches to work effectively alongside men for the benefit of all.

In our daily work, for instance, when we visit construction sites or projects across various regions, we often lack proper sanitary facilities to meet our basic needs with dignity—especially during menstruation. Pregnancy can disrupt or lower career trajectories. When children are infants or young, or when there are sick or elderly family members at home, many women end up leaving their careers due to a lack of support. This leaves them economically dependent on male household members and facing greater vulnerability. And in case we manage not to abandon our careers in addition to our daily work, returning home is to continue working on these tasks because it is mostly women who perform these household duties.

“WOMEN PLAY AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN PROMOTING WATER, WHICH IN TURN CONTRIBUTES TO PEACE AND SECURITY”

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?

Water is a sine qua non condition for sustainable peace in territories. Without water, survival is impossible; without an adequate quantity and quality of water, health and well-being are compromised. Today, climate change exacerbates the gaps in water and sanitation in the Latin American region, making the task of closing these gaps more challenging. Severe droughts and floods lead to reduced agricultural production, affecting jobs and incomes for farmers. Parameters for safe drinking water quality are altered (such as increased sodium due to mixing with seawater), leading to health issues. Dengue epidemics and other diseases arise from drainage system collapses during heavy rains. The trend is not encouraging, especially because the underlying problem of poor resource governance persists, posing a risk of increased social conflict related to water issues.

In our region, there are already various protests and social conflicts related to water. People who no longer have access to water protest and block roads. As I respond to this question, one of Peru's main highways, leading to Iquitos (known as the capital of the Peruvian Amazon), is currently blocked by residents demanding access to water.

In this context, women play an essential role in promoting water, which in turn contributes to peace and security. We are already advocating and working for universal access to water and sanitation. Closing these gaps will bring sustainable peace to all.

An example is the creation of the organization I lead, AGUA GLOBAL, which I founded with the vision of making a valuable contribution through effective solutions so that Latin America progresses toward the targets of SDG 6 based on leadership and innovation, while also considering a gender perspective and promoting women's participation in the sector. Our path is extremely challenging, but I am convinced it is the right one to help change the trend regarding water and sanitation challenges in our region, which are immense and causing significant suffering. We must break this trend to ensure that our future generations have sustainable peace and well-being.

