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OPEN RIVERS :

RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# WOMEN & WATER : CALLING



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image of Ann Raiho with a canoe, is courtesy of Natalie Warren.

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PERSPECTIVES

# WATER AS WEAPON: GENDER AND WASH

By Becky L. Jacobs

*The wars of the next century will concern water.*  
Ismail Serageldin[1]

Policy experts have long warned that water will be a source of future global conflict.[2] Life-threatening water-related struggles, however, have been, and continue to be, part of the lived experience of many women and girls the world over. The lack of access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services or to well-designed and

adequately monitored WASH facilities increases vulnerability to violence, corrupting water (or, more accurately, the lack of access thereto) and transforming it into a potent gendered weapon. To paraphrase the editors of this journal, water is a site where the inequalities in society are made visible and contestation arises.[3]



*In Bangladesh, Rohingya women in refugee camps share stories of loss and hopes of recovery.  
(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) UN Women/Allison Joyce.*

These are not far-future, hypothetical contestations; they exist now and are well documented. Case studies from over thirty countries report the wide range of violence to which women are vulnerable in the context of WASH facilities, including domestic or intimate partner violence and violence inflicted by unrelated individuals and ranging from verbal, psychological, and socio-cultural assaults to physical attacks, sexual violence, and murder.[4] Data suggest that women who must practice open defecation may have nearly double the risk of non-partner sexual violence compared to women who have access to a toilet in their household.[5] In one study, 94 percent of participating women reported that they faced violence or harassment when leaving the home to defecate, and more than 33 percent reported that they had been physically assaulted.[6]

*Editor's note: This paragraph contains graphic descriptions of sexual violence which may be harmful to some readers.*

The “water as weapon” theme has previously been explored in this journal by water scientist Peter Gleick, who explains that “reports of water-related violence are on the rise...the vast majority of [which] involve non-state actors [and are] well correlated with water-scarce regions of the world where rising populations and growing economies must compete for fixed and often seriously limited amounts of water.”[9] Water has been weaponized in a particularly gendered way by increasing the vulnerability to violence of women and girls in certain contexts, including when accessing WASH facilities; when perceived to be failing to complete WASH-related responsibilities such as providing household water; when resisting sexual exploitation while seeking access to WASH facilities or services; or when attempting to participate in WASH decision-making or otherwise violating WASH-related gender norms.[10] Yet women in countries with highly developed economies and which rank highly on the U.N.’s Human Development Index are not immune to WASH-related vulnerability to

violence. In the U.S., for example, countless women have reported being assaulted and/or raped in bathroom and shower facilities at outdoor concert venues and campgrounds, portable business bathroom units, and public restrooms.[11] In addition, this weapon can create disproportionate damage when gender intersects other marginalized identities such as age, ability, caste, race, religion, indigeneity, and marital status.[12]

Violence is just one of the most direct aspects of the gendered weaponization of water. Lack of access to WASH resources disproportionately burdens the health of women and girls, increasing rates of under-five mortality, low height-for-age, and schistosomiasis/intestinal parasites; increasing the risk of exposure to and transmission and contraction of disease and urinary tract infections; and increasing the risk of musculoskeletal disorders attributed to long-term carrying of water over long distances.[13] It also implicates various sociocultural taboos associated with menstruation and the roles and responsibilities of women and girls in terms of water collection and other WASH-related responsibilities. These normative gender-specific factors also can serve as barriers to participation in community WASH-related planning and can, in conjunction with a lack of WASH facilities in schools, negatively impact the academic attendance and performance of girls, a result with consequences for an individual’s self-esteem, future mobility, and educational and employment prospects.[14]

A law professor’s instinct is to advocate for a legal response to these tragedies. At a general level, a basic human right to sanitation “is contained in existing human rights treaties and is therefore legally binding” under international law.[15] More specifically, several international agreements acknowledge the intersectionality of gender and inadequate sanitation. For example, Article 14(2)(h) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (“CEDAW”) seeks to ensure the right of women “[t]o enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to . . . sanitation[.]”[16] The



*UN Women humanitarian work with refugees in Cameroon. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) UN Women/  
Ryan Brown.*

Convention on the Rights of the Child (“CRC”) contains several articles that pertain to sanitation: Article 27(1), which corresponds to the right to an adequate standard of living and which has been interpreted to include “access to food, clean drinking water, adequate housing and latrines” and Article 24(2)(e), which corresponds to the highest attainable standard of health provision and which mentions sanitation.[17] This legal framework has failed, however, in the context of WASH-related gendered violence.

Although these international legal commitments often are more aspirational than operational at a national level, many countries also have made, and seemingly have failed to honor, similar constitutional commitments to their citizens. South Africa is one example. Its Constitution contains several clauses that “directly or indirectly imply the right to basic sanitation.”[18] Section 27(1)(b) of the South African Constitution provides that “everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water,”[19] and the constitutional rights to privacy and dignity also have been associated with the right of access to sanitation by the Constitutional Court of South Africa.[20] That country also has a progressive framework for basic services, including a right of access to basic sanitation as defined in the Water Services Act.[21] Yet accounts of WASH-related violence and other concerns routinely are reported in South Africa, so additional laws there, and elsewhere, likely would be more for affect than would be effective.

If law alone is not the answer, other disciplines might offer successful interventions that might constitutively express in physical and other forms the legal commitment to respond to the intersectionality of gender violence and inadequate sanitation. For example, scholars have conceptualized WASH-related gendered violence as passive infrastructural violence, a physical and psychological form of suffering experienced by

those who are physically, socially, and politically excluded from infrastructure.[22] This theoretical approach provides a useful frame for addressing violence against women and girls associated with WASH access from multiple perspectives and disciplines. Political and social scientists could provide support to ensure the political/civil/social participation of users, including women and girls, in the design of community and physical infrastructure, such as WASH facilities and the siting thereof. Architects, site and infrastructure designers, engineers, contractors, technicians, and maintenance professionals would collaborate with users on final design and long-term conservation principles. Policymakers, government officials, and funding entities would insist on this infrastructural citizenship, particularly encouraging a gender-sensitive model thereof.

Still, this model is not yet in place, and women continue to experience water as weapon in virtually every setting imaginable. The association between WASH services and gendered vulnerability to violence in rural locales and urban slums in developing countries has received the most study, but women everywhere are vulnerable when they lack access to, or are accessing, WASH services. All of which leaves one asking why global leaders focus on the possibility of *future* water-related conflict rather than respond to the very real crisis conditions in which women and girls exist now? These are serious matters that merit critical attention. As one report noted, the “deaths each year related to [WASH issues] dwarf the casualties associated with violent conflict. No act of terrorism generates economic devastation on the scale of the crisis in water and sanitation. Yet the issue barely registers on the international agenda.”[23] Rather, these issues are often brought to the table entangled in gruesome acts of gendered violence. Let us hope that no more female victims of WASH-associated violence need become attention-grabbing headlines in order to dispel this apathy and to disarm water as gendered weapon.

## Footnotes

[1] Ismail Serageldin, “Water Wars? A Talk with Ismail Serageldin,” *World Policy Journal* 26, no. 4 (2009), 25–31.

[2] Ariel Dinar, Shlomi Dinar, Daene C. McKinney, and Stephen C. McCaffrey, *Bridges over Water: Understanding Transboundary Water Conflict, Negotiation and Cooperation*, 3 (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2007).

[3] Editors of *Open Rivers*, “Paradoxes of Water: A Reading List,” *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 11 (2018), <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/paradoxes-of-water-a-reading-list/>.

[4] Marni Sommer, Suzanne Ferron, Sue Cavill, and Sarah House, “Violence, Gender and WASH: Spurring Action on a Complex, Under-Documented and Sensitive Topic,” *Environment and Urbanization* 27, no. 1 (2015): 105–16.

[5] Apoorva Jadhav, Abigail Weitzman, and Emily Smith-Greenaway, “Household Sanitation Facilities and Women’s Risk of Non-Partner Sexual Violence in India,” *BMC Public Health* 16, no. 1 (2016), 1–10. These authors focus on gendered violence herein, acknowledging that “gender” is a social construct based upon a set of behavioral norms within a certain culture that are considered to be appropriate for individuals of a specific sex and that often are determinative of traditional responsibilities and tasks.

[6] Written evidence submitted by WaterAid, U.K. House of Commons International Development Committee (January 2013), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmint-dev/107/107vw29.htm>.

[7] Arya Divya, “India’s Long, Dark and Dangerous Walk to the Toilet,” *BBC News Magazine* (June 27, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28039513>.

[8] Liesl Pretorius, “Dying for a Toilet,” *City Press* (May 29, 2016), <http://city-press.news24.com/News/dying-for-a-toilet-20160528>.

[9] Peter Gleick, “Water, Conflict, and Peace,” *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community* no. 11 (2018), <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/water-conflict-and-peace/>.

[10] Bethany A. Caruso, Amelia Conrad, Allison Salinger, Madeleine Patrick, Awa Youm, and Sheela Sinharoy, *A Conceptual Framework to Inform National and Global Monitoring of Gender Equality in WASH* (WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation, and Hygiene, June 2021). A person’s gender expression is not always identical to the person’s biological sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

[11] Gus Burns, Taylor DesOrmeau, and Danielle Salisbury, “‘A Sexual Predator’s Paradise.’ Investigation of Faster Horses Music Festival Uncovers 30 Reported Sexual Assaults,” *Mlive* (Nov. 16, 2021); Helena Wegner, “Woman Raped in Bathroom at Business: Cops. Man Gets Prison,” *Tacoma News Tribune* (Dec. 14, 2021).



[12] Caruso et al., *A Conceptual Framework*.

[13] Panthea Pouramin, Nidhi Nagabhatla, and Michela Miletto, “A Systematic Review of Water and Gender Interlinkages: Assessing the Intersection with Health,” *Frontiers in Water* (April 15, 2020) 6, <https://doi.org/10.3389/frwa.2020.00006>.

[14] WaterAid, (2013).

[15] UN General Assembly, Resolution 64/292, The Human Right to Water and Sanitation, A/RES/64/292 (July 28, 2010), [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/64/292](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/64/292); UN General Assembly, Resolution 68/157, The Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, A/RES/68/157 (Dec. 18, 2013), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/448/87/PDF/N1344887.pdf?OpenElement>; UN General Assembly, Resolution 70/169, The Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, A/RES/70/169 (Dec. 17, 2015), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/442/72/PDF/N1544272.pdf?OpenElement>.

[16] Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Art 14(2)(h), (Dec. 18, 1979), 1249 U.N.T.S. 20378, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>.

[17] Convention on the Rights of the Child, Preamble, (Nov. 20, 1989), 1577 U.N.T.S. 27531, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

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[19] Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996, Bill of Rights, Sections 27(1)(b), 27(2), (Dec. 18, 1996), <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf>.

[20] *Ntombentsha Beja v. Premier of the Western Cape and Others*, No. 21332/10, (Western Cape High Court, 2011).

[21] Neele Wiltgen Georgi, Sibongile Buthelezi, and Paula Meth, “Gendered Infrastructural Citizenship: Shared Sanitation Facilities in Quarry Road West Informal Settlement, Durban, South Africa,” *Urban Forum*, 32, no. 4 (Springer Netherlands, 2021), 437–56; Dennis Rodgers and Bruce O’Neill, “Infrastructural Violence: Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Ethnography* 13, no. 4 (2012), 401–12.

[22] Wiltgen Georgi, Buthelezi, and Meth, “Gendered Infrastructural Citizenship.”

[23] Kevin Watkins, *UNDP Human Development Report 2006: Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis*, (New York: U.N. Development Programme, 2006), 3, <https://perma.cc/3RHA-7UDV>.

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