

UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL - 18th SESSION
WOMEN & THE RIGHT TO WATER - HIGH LEVEL PANEL

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Room XXI

Speaking Notes:
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Organization)

Good morning.

Distinguished colleagues, I am very pleased to be here with you today- speaking on behalf of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)- an international women's organization working for a just world that promotes and protects human rights, gender equality and the integrity of the environment.

Extreme degradation of ecosystems, unmitigated climate change, and over-consumption of water in rich countries and by the rich in poor countries exacerbated often by government policy, as well as the impact of extreme poverty, have all contributed to an environmental catastrophe in the world's water supply. The poorest of our society, more than half of whom are women, are regularly excluded from access to safe drinking water and from having a role in policy decisions about the development of water resources- a reality which poses a threat to human rights. These rights, as the Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation has stated, are fundamental to human dignity and essential to the realization of many other internationally recognized human rights.

With the GA and Human Rights Council affirming that water and sanitation are human rights, the international community took a step forward in tackling these injustices. Full realization of these rights requires that water and sanitation must be available, physically and economically accessible safe, acceptable and affordable for all without discrimination. Furthermore, the rights to water and sanitation are essential for the realization of the rights to health, to food, to an adequate standard of living and in some cases, the rights to life, education, and so on.

The right to water refers to personal and domestic uses, which include drinking, cooking, cleaning, hygiene and subsistence food production/agriculture).The most generous estimates are that no more than 10% of the world's water is needed for personal use, with the remaining 70% for agriculture and 20% for industry. It must be understood however, that the economic uses of water greatly affect personal and domestic use. The poor have the least access to water, and when they have access, they pay more for it than the rich. Water and sanitation is routinely denied to informal settlements, and rural inhabitants' needs are often just ignored.

How does this link to climate change?

The rights to water and sanitation hinge upon a stable and healthy environment. In the face of climate change, realizing the rights to water and sanitation is a challenge for all, even more so for women who are often most responsible for water management but not its policy, and are regularly hardest hit by stress on water supply and contamination.

Climate change is characterized by erratic weather patterns leading to droughts, floods, more frequent and more intense natural disasters, and other phenomena. Experts agree that water will be the first natural resource affected by climate change- already visible

through impacts such as sea level rise affecting small island states, and salt water intrusion into ground water and sewage systems.

Climate change is also expected to increase migration, particularly within countries, as individuals and communities move locations in order to adapt to the changing natural environment. Much of this migration is likely to be rural to urban, which will lead to expansion of informal settlements and communities that are often built on vulnerable land, outside of existing infrastructure for water and sanitation services. The lack of sanitation and clean water can increase incidence of water-borne diseases and other preventable diseases, particularly as disease vectors move due to changing temperatures. In some cases, the migration may be a result of conflict over resources, including water and its role in the development of people.

How does this link between water and climate change affect women?

The right and access to clean water is intrinsically linked to gender equality. If we dig a little deeper into the content of the right to water and sanitation, we can easily see the differential impact on women when their rights to water and sanitation are impeded. Often natural resource managers, women and girls are responsible for collecting water for cooking, cleaning, drinking, health and hygiene, and growing food. However, decisions made about water and sanitation services continue to neglect gendered needs and concerns – largely because women are regularly left out of those policy-making spheres.

Women often have to travel long distances to collect water for their communities-carrying 20 litres of water per day over 6 km for 4-5 or more hours. Girls are often kept out of school –perpetuating a cycle of poverty and illiteracy and increasing the gender gap. Additionally, carrying water over long distances through isolated areas puts women and girls at risk of sexual violence and physical attacks.

Unsafe drinking water and sanitation facilities undermine the rights to life, health, education and adequate standard of living of all people, and given women and girls disproportionate burden in the household, the impact on women and girls is increased. Women care for the sick, who often have illnesses that could be prevented with access to clean water. Even when women have knowledge of what's necessary to maintain a hygienic environment, they lack the means and access to make it happen.

Climate change and biodiversity loss have caused changes in our water resources with increased droughts and floods, reduced water access and quality, and increased the threat of vectorborne, foodborne and waterborne diseases- further exacerbating women's burden.

Climate change will bring new weather patterns, affecting the distribution and quantity of rainfall. In many countries and regions, women rely on rainfall to provide drinking water. And further, women are principally responsible for household food production across the world, often relying on rainfed agriculture to feed their families. Therefore, changes in water resource patterns would force these women to adapt and mitigate re food

production and water management. How is this taken into consideration in climate change policies and financing mechanisms?

Links between sanitation and climate change are not as obvious as those between water and climate change, although decrease in water supply definitely affect water-based sanitation facilities. One of the key points to understand is that separate and culturally acceptable sanitation facilities are often a prerequisite for girls to attend school or participate in the public sphere and therefore should be in the mix when climate change is under discussion.

Given the impacts of climate change on all peoples and communities, particularly women, lack of action on climate change can be considered a violation of women's human rights in some instances. Given the global nature of climate change, it may be difficult to allocate cause and effect to any one state, but we can certainly agree that the adverse effects of climate change undermine the enjoyment of the right to water and sanitation through floods and droughts, changes in precipitation and temperature extremes that result in water scarcity and increased competition for water resources, disruption to waterborne sanitation systems, contamination of drinking water and exacerbation of the spread of disease.

How does the right to water support a global deal on climate change, and women's role in it? How does the right to water fit in? How does it aid women's ability to adapt to and address climate change? How does it impact the ability of the climate negotiations to be gender responsive?

Climate change is a complex global problem that knows no national boundaries. In contrast, with some limited exceptions, human rights obligations remain primarily within the purview of States as duty-bearers and individuals as rights-holders. Climate change policy and decision-making and legal regimes are dominated by scientists, economists and policy-makers, while human rights is a field peopled by lawyers and political scientists. Despite these differences, most States that are negotiating under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are also parties to the major international human rights treaties, which obliges them to consider/respect human rights in developing the new, post-2012 climate framework and the related national policies and programs.

In her excellent paper on Climate Change and the Right to Water and Sanitation, Special Rapporteur Caterina de Albuquerque argued that a human rights approach might positively affect the often impossibly slow negotiations toward an international agreement to combat the negative effects of climate change. A rights-based framework could put a human face on climate change and help scientists, economists and policymakers reach consensus in a manner that would benefit all communities.

She makes the point that "the inter-linked and inter-dependent nature of human rights calls for more holistic approaches and inter-sectoral thinking in climate change policy-making. The human rights to health, housing (including secure tenure), and food are foremost among these, along with human rights guarantees for greater transparency, active, free and meaningful participation, and strengthen accountability in climate change

decision-making. Climate change, including its projected impacts upon the rights to water and sanitation, should be seen as an integral part of national development and poverty reduction planning processes, for the sake of improved legal and policy coherence.”

Many civil society advocates, including WEDO, are doing just that! They draw upon the rights-based framework to inform their positions, make recommendations to negotiators and raise awareness of (differentiated) impacts of climate change. For example, at the climate negotiations last year in Cancun, the Women and Gender Constituency, of which WEDO is a founding member, delivered its final intervention, timed with Human Rights Day, to stress that *“Women’s rights are human rights. No agreement, decision or mechanism on climate change will be effective or successful without the full respect of women’s rights and the recognition of our valuable knowledge. Women are crucial in sustaining daily life and livelihoods. We must recognize the differentiated impacts of climatic changes on women and men as a result of structural inequalities: inequalities that are exacerbated by climate change.”*

As we see, climate change and policies to combat it becomes an important vehicle to ensure each person can exercise her right to water and sanitation. And women have been advocating for this right for decades!

Women have shown strong leadership both in terms of advocacy towards the protection and conservation of natural resources as well as innovation in the water sector. Women have been central to the struggle against the sale of public water to transnational corporations (TNCs), through lobbying local authorities and national ministries, forming local women’s associations, and organizing marches, campaigns and direct actions. Now, with an affirmed right to water and sanitation, women and other activists have further leverage to hold governments accountable.

Various organizations and fora are investigating the links between water, food and energy security, including the Bonn2011 Nexus Conference in November. At the base of those links is the human right to water. And the people most affected by lack of water, food and energy security at the household level are poor women in developing countries.

The scope of my remarks today prevents me from delving deeply into the detailed recommendations made in the special rapporteur’s report on climate change and water. The main thrust is that if all mitigation efforts by states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and all adaptation efforts by states to cope with the negative impact of climate change and disasters used a human rights impact assessment, then climate negotiations would have a coherent and inclusive way forward. The assessment would be based on whether everyone, especially poor women, indigenous people, refugees and asylum seekers, could realize their rights to sufficient amounts of safe, physically accessible and affordable water, and whether adequate and culturally appropriate sanitation facilities were available. These assessments would mean that the carbon trading and national adaptation plans would have to take into account the needs of the most vulnerable and not just the economic bottom line.

Furthermore, if principles of participation and transparency were integrated into the climate change negotiations, women's concerns and expertise could strengthen the policy and legal architecture governing climate change.

So, while climate change clearly impacts women's rights to water and sanitation, we cannot ignore the relationship between the right to water and the rights to health, life, education, food, housing and the right to an adequate standard of living. The ability to freely participate in a meaningful and transparent decision-making process that is accountable is a cornerstone for women's equality and one that must be upheld in all fora.

It seems clear to me that affirming the right to water and sanitation paves way for more women to be effective leaders, innovators and able to take a lead in development plans and poverty eradication strategies. All of these issues are interlinked and cannot be viewed in isolation.

Thank you