



# Equitable access to water for women

## KEY QUESTIONS

- What barriers prevent equitable access to water by women?
- What impact do these barriers have?

Issues of gender, economics, education and disability complicate the challenges of identifying and mitigating the limitations women face in accessing water.

In 2000, the United Nations recognised women as the prime users of ‘domestic water’, often collected from isolated sources. Women face practical, social, economic, physical and cultural challenges in accessing water, exacerbated because they are usually the primary carers in the household. Practical difficulties mainly stem from inadequate or non-existent infrastructure. Social and cultural barriers are often due to power and dominance issues. Physically, the sheer quantity of water collected and carried over long distances often risks women’s health and safety. Financially, women often have to take poorly paid jobs or have few opportunities to make a decent income, limiting their opportunities to buy water. Although women bear the brunt of challenges in accessing water, their difficulties have knock-on effects on communities and society more generally.

## BARRIERS TO ACCESSING WATER FACED BY WOMEN

Lack of infrastructure in poor communities means that women spend a significant amount of time collecting water. In sub-Saharan Africa, an average trip takes 33 minutes each way (Vogelstein, 2017) and women often make many trips a day. The time spent collecting water means women do not have time for economic, educational or social activities – households and communities suffer.

Women often work in the informal sector which seldom offers adequate water and hygiene facilities. This makes it difficult for women, especially when menstruating and

they cope by abstaining from work resulting in reduced or no income.

Social issues in communities may limit women’s water access. In some areas women may not have permission from their husbands to participate in village activities (Leder and Clement, 2017) such as projects that seek to empower women and solicit their opinion, be it regarding choices on appropriate water point locations, technologies or tariffing structures. This forced lack of participation further limits their access.

Decisions about where to locate standpipes can be made by men who never collect water (Barua, 2016). Women’s views on sites for community latrines and WASH facilities are often not sought.

In villages where it is difficult to connect all households to water supplies, water standpipes may be sited near families that are well connected politically or socially (Leder and Clement, 2017). Social barriers affect the poorer, more vulnerable households and especially women in these households.

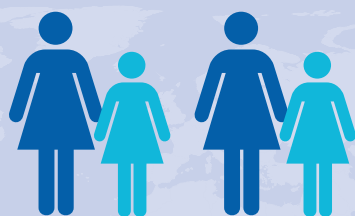
Where women have to walk a long way to collect water, their safety and health may suffer. The loads that women carry strain their shoulders, necks and backs, and may induce early labour and miscarriages for those who are pregnant (Geere, 2010).



*Many women are the primary carer and the sole water collector in their household*

*Image: CRIDF*

Globally, **women and girls** are the **primary water collectors** for their families



<sup>1</sup> UN Women. 2014. Collecting and carrying water, burdensome reality for women. United Nations: New York, USA. Available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/3/collecting-and-carrying-water-burdensome-reality-for-women>



In African countries, **women are five times more likely** than men to **collect drinking water** for the household

<sup>2</sup> Koolwal, G. and van de Walle, D. 2010. Access to Water, Women's Work and Child Outcomes. The World Bank Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network, Gender and Development Unit: Washington, DC, USA. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/3789/WPS5302.pdf?sequence=1>

In sub-Saharan Africa, **women spend 40 billion hours a year** collecting water. That is equivalent to **a year's worth of labour** by the **entire French workforce**



<sup>3</sup> Mis, M. 2013. 5 facts: Women and water. Thomson Reuters Foundation: London, UK. Available at: <http://news.trust.org/slideshow/?id=bfab5e1e-61f9-4ff0-a661-840fc90a73ca>

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Research shows that when women are involved in making decisions about water and participate in water user committees, water infrastructure tends to be more effective and generate more revenue (Mommen et al., 2017). Women are also more likely to reinvest the proceeds of water infrastructure in community development (Vogelstein, 2017).

CRIDF works with institutions to build awareness of the lack of women's involvement in decisions about water infrastructure and help institutions develop the capacity to be more inclusive when designing, implementing and operating water infrastructure. Tools and guidelines, such as those developed by CRIDF, can help sociologists and engineers design water infrastructure that responds to the needs of women and girls, ensuring that when it comes to clean water access, we leave no one behind.

## ABOUT CRIDF

The Climate Resilient Infrastructure Development Facility (CRIDF) is a DFID (UK Aid) supported programme working to provide long-term solutions to water issues that affect the lives of the poor in Southern Africa. Our focus is to work together with organisations to show them how they can better build and manage their own water infrastructure to improve people's lives. Because rivers, lakes and river basins cross borders, CRIDF is working with 12 different countries in Southern Africa that share water resources. In so doing, CRIDF aims to improve the lives of over 200 million people, many of them extremely poor.

## Further reading

- Barua, A. 2016. Overcoming social barriers: A journey by women WASH platform. Oxfam: Oxford, UK. Available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2016/10/overcoming-social-barriers-a-journey-by-women-wash-platform>
- Geere, J., Hunter, P. and Jagals, P. 2010. Domestic water carrying and its implications for health: a review and mixed methods pilot study in Limpopo Province, South Africa. *Environmental Health* 9(52). doi:10.1186/1476-069X-9-52
- Leder, S. and Clement, F. 2017. Why access to water may not benefit all women equally. Oxfam: Oxford, UK. Available at: <https://views-voices.oxfam.org.uk/general/2017/09/access-to-water-women>
- Mommen, B., Humphries-Waa, K. and Gwavuya, S. 2017. Does women's participation in water committees affect management and water system performance in rural Vanuatu? *Waterlines* 36(3). doi: 10.3362/1756-3488.16-00026
- United Nations. 2005. Women2000 and Beyond. Publication series available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/W2000andBeyond.html>
- Vogelstein, R. 2017. Water access is a gender equality issue. Council on Foreign Relations: New York, USA. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/water-access-gender-equality-issue>



The CRIDF **Water for All** series highlights cross-cutting themes related to water infrastructure that CRIDF would like to explore with partners and interested parties.

## Contact us

If you are interested in the services CRIDF offers, please email: [enquiries@cridf.com](mailto:enquiries@cridf.com)