I. INTRODUCTION

In 2010 the UN General Assembly officially recognized water and sanitation (WASH) as basic human rights which States are responsible for making universally available and accessible. Yet, as of 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that roughly 2.3 billion people cannot access to basic sanitation services, 892 million still practice open defecation, and 844 million lack access to drinking water. The absence of these services in both private and public spaces disproportionately affects those living in the Global South, as 58 percent of the 159 million who must spend hours journeying each day to collect water from surface water sources are from sub-Saharan Africa. Among them, women and girls are typically made responsible for dedicating their time to compensating for lack of WASH infrastructure – time which they could be dedicating to studies or work alongside their male peers.

On 18 March 2019, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), the Permanent Missions of India, Norway, Singapore and South Africa to the UN in New York and the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) co-hosted a side event at the 63rd session of the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW). The overarching aim of the session was to feed the priority theme for CSW63: social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. It focused on best practices and lessons learned from national WASH programs in the Global South, and how to further elevate discussions on WASH services for women and girls as a key determinant of women's empowerment. Conclusions from the session informed deliberations around Agreed Conclusions of CSW63.

The session was attended by delegates attending the Commission on the Status of Women including government officials and representatives, civil society organizations, women networks, researchers, and UN agencies.

Speakers included representatives of the governments of Cameroon, India, Norway, Singapore and South Africa, as well as speakers from WASH organizations that operate in each of these countries. Priority areas outlined by this panel of experts included their take on the negative impacts that lack of access to WASH both in and outside the home has on women and girls’ rights to health, education, decent working conditions, and overall participation in public life, and how to address these gaps. Beyond women and girls, other marginalized groups such as refugees and people with disabilities were highlighted as people who face particular difficulties in accessing adequate, safe WASH services.

This report is a summary of their discussions and presentations.
II. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSION

The session’s objectives were to:
- Examine the role and challenges faced by States in delivering WASH as a public service;
- Share best practices and lessons learned from WASH programs in different countries;
- Contribute to the global policy debate around the importance of access to WASH as a public service, and;
- Draw attention to the importance of addressing WASH in international fora as a cross-cutting issue.

III. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Panel moderator and Permanent Representative of Singapore to the UN in New York, Ambassador Burhan Gafoor opened the session by thanking the panelists, hosts, and all great advocates and champions of issues relating to WASH. He reminded the room of what is at stake in taking action on improving gender equality in WASH services, stating that, “unfortunately, the reality is that in so many parts of the world, lack of access to clean water and sanitation affects, disproportionately, women and girls. It affects their access to education, it affects their ability to learn, and has so many consequences for sustainable development. If we are serious about gender equality and implementing agenda 2030, we really have to pay serious attention to issues relating to access to WASH”. He also highlighted the importance of the issue outside of sustainable development goals (SDGs), namely its centrality to human dignity. Before handing off to his fellow panelists, Ambassador Gafoor offered an inspirational note by referencing Singapore’s history of progress towards improving equitable access to WASH for all its citizens. He expressed hope that Singapore’s experiences show that the hurdles and complexities involved in realizing gender-inclusive WASH services can be overcome.
H.E. Ms Marie Thérèse Abena Ondoa, Cameroon

"Many groups have to look for water. When that water is not available, they have to trek for long distances. When boys and girls come home from school, the girls are the ones going for water, while the boys prepare for the next day’s lesson."

H.E. Ms Marie Thérèse Abena Ondoa

In response to the disproportional impacts that poor WASH infrastructure has on schoolgirls, Ondoa and her colleagues have insisted on the integration of toilets which are gender sensitive and which feature menstrual health and hygiene facilities in all new schools being built in Cameroon. They have also requested that wells be built in well-populated areas. These efforts have been complemented with workshops led by the government and women’s associations to train girls on menstrual hygiene and how to manufacture sanitary pads. Emphasis has been placed on making re-usable menstrual materials in order to minimize the detrimental environmental effects of improper disposal of single-use products.

Ondoa stated that a collaboration between different government ministries has been a central part of realizing gender-sensitive programming in Cameroon. She shared that, “(the ministries of) water, energy, and all those intervening in society, particularly with education and health have been working together so that we can have facilities that respect hygiene and sanitation, and make it possible for women and girls and the population at large to be safer, avoid illnesses, and to lead better lives.”

H.E. Sharon Pinky Kekana, South Africa

South Africa’s Deputy Minister of Communications, H.E. Sharon Pinky brought the conversation to the health-related and economic implications of lack of access to WASH services, and advocated for the need to place women at the center of planning, executing, monitoring and evaluating WASH programming.

Kekana stressed the relationship between WASH and disparities between the rich and poor, noting that, “the poor spend time looking for water rather than participating in economies”. This imbalance pertains particularly to women. Research shows that they spend 660 hours collecting water for their households, which equates to two full months of labor. While their husbands are out in cities, engaged in or looking for employment, women must travel long distances to remote areas where they are at particular risk for gender-based violence.

In Kekana’s view, WASH programming must be rooted in realizing the rights to autonomy, owning property, work and health, and reproductive rights. Most pertinently, they should be guided by women themselves. Many women come to Kekana, asking why they must still fight for greater participation in WASH management. The Deputy Minister believes that States must step in and support women in taking their rightful place in the sector.
Ms Gabsie Mathenjwa, South Africa

Representing the government of South Africa, Ms Gabsie Mathenjwa emphasized the importance of protecting children’s rights and wellbeing, and offered knowledge on the South African National Empowerment Framework as an example of policy, legislation and collaboration as means of improving WASH services. Mathenjwa reiterated other panelists’ insights on the detriments to physical wellbeing, the environment, and participation in academic and work life that are perpetuated by lack of access to WASH. In light of this, she presented three priority areas of programming in regards to protecting children’s rights, including: respect for the right to dignity and protection from degrading treatment, freedom from environmental risks to health, and protection from being required to undertake any tasks which pose a risk to health. The South African government is working to improve WASH services by ensuring policy is aligned with legislation. Their National Empowerment Framework in particular has been fashioned to align with the SDG 2030 Agenda. Mathenjwa stated that cross-sectoral collaboration has been paramount in building the framework. The government has invited the private sector and others to look at WASH issues as a collective. They have formed a commission to conduct cooperative research on WASH, and have involved the departments of water, health, and education in forming comprehensive guidelines for school sanitation.

Ms Merete Brattested, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

“... We need WASH champions to stand up for increased investment in WASH and in changing behaviors and attitudes. We do not like to talk about toilets, diarrhea and menstrual health, but these topics need to be spoken about. We need men to speak about them, and we need to widen focus beyond the home, to public areas.”

Ms. Merete Brattested

Secretary General of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Department for UN and Humanitarian Affairs, Ms Merete Brattested turned discussions to building programming which leaves no one behind, and the need to consider how WASH affects people’s lives from childhood to adulthood. She reminded the audience that, “women with children, refugees, and disabled people are overlooked and face discrimination as they try to access and manage the safe WASH services that they need”. The burdens of poor WASH follow women and girls throughout their lives. Pregnant women are likely to have to collect and carry water for their baby’s delivery and weaning infants off of breastmilk exposes them to unsanitary water that may cause diarrhea. From the age of six, girls’ days are consumed by traveling to collect water, and lack of WASH facilities make it difficult to thrive in schools and workplaces. Early dropout and inability to participate in the workforce contribute to early marriage and child bearing. But Ms Brattested insisted that this vicious cycle can be broken through increased investment in WASH and changes in behavioral attitudes.
H.E. Mr Nagaraj Naidu Kakanur, India

H.E. Mr Nagaraj Naidu Kakanur, Deputy Permanent Representative of India, reiterated the importance of collaboration and making women equal players in WASH management. He shared India’s successes in doing just this through their Clean India Mission.

Echoing Ms Mathenjwa’s statements, Kakanur stated that, “women are extremely important stakeholders in both the use and management of WASH”. Amongst the estimated 500,000 community motivators involved in the Clean India Mission, women have played a critical role at every step from planning to serving as masons to build toilets. Together, they have built nearly 19 million toilets in rural areas across the last four years. Kakanur also spotlighted menstrual health as an important component of giving life to the mission. The program has worked to introduce low-cost, appropriate solutions and to promote awareness of menstrual hygiene and health among women, girls and their families. To close, Mr Kakanur promised to relay key messages of the session to his colleagues, and expressed that the panel’s discussions reassured him that the progress seen in India can be replicated in other parts of the globe.

EVENT TWEETS

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
“The poor spend more ime looking for water than participating in the economy. The right to natural resources means the right to autonomy” - H.E. Sharon Pinky Kekana concluded her amazing speech at #CSW63

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
Her Excellency Sharon Pinky Kekana - “As we do advocacy problems, let’s not leave our male counterparts behind. These issues are seen as taboo but let’s make them issues that are at the centre.”
pic.twitter.com/8YstsXx32r

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
“Good latrines reduces the chance of cholera propagation in some parts of the country” - the Minister of Women’s Empowerment and Family of Cameroon kicks us off! #CSW63 #WASH

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
Prof. @Chary_VSC “Taking the feedback of citizens allowed us to understand what was hampering the usage of public toilets by women” at #CSW63

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
Her Excellency Sharon Pinky Kekana - “As we do advocacy problems, let’s not leave our male counterparts behind. These issues are seen as taboo but let’s make them issues that are at the centre.”

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
“The human rights based approach is a paradigmatic shift from the notion that #WASH is some sort of charity for underserving poor. The right to water security is an entitlement - every person on this planet deserves to have #WASH” - Dunja Krause, Research Officer at @UNRISD

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
Olivia Boum says how @Kmerpad is “working with the Minister of Education of #Cameroon and @unicefcameroon to create a curriculum for girls in schools to let them know more about menstruation.”
pic.twitter.com/fZHMVAjEqS

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
Prof. @Chary_VSC addressing us on how “cleanliness, sanitary pad disposal, odor control, good lighting, and most importantly, exclusive toilets for women with a female caretaker” are important factors in women’s willingness to use public toilets in #Warangal, India
pic.twitter.com/4RXBbAl0ff
As a research officer for UNRISD, Ms Dunja Krause shared insights on the role of public policies in delivering WASH-related services. She pinpointed a human rights-based approach and social protection as avenues for achieving universal, equitable WASH by 2030.

Krause identified how a human rights-based approach directly translates to State protections and strong public policy framework. She went on to illuminate how the approach facilitates the identification and promotion of topical issues that concern social protection, which is a key step in addressing gaps in universal coverage. Borrowing guiding principles from human rights, such as dignity, can help to build policies which consider the unique difficulties of marginalized groups in accessing WASH.

Krause closed by asking attendees of the session to encourage their own countries to engage with UNIRSD’s platform for rights-based social protection.

“\nThe human rights-based approach removes the idea that social protections are some sort of charity for the ‘underserving poor’. It changes that narrative into one that views access to WASH as an entitlement for everyone on this planet. It also places a direct responsibility on States to ensure these rights are protected and promoted.\n”

Ms Dunja Krause
Professor V. Srinivas Chary, who has worked on India’s SHE Toilets Project through his positions as professor and director at the Administrative Staff College of India, spoke on adapting public WASH facilities to respond to women and girls’ needs.

The SHE Toilets Project has introduced 40 women-only toilet facilities to Warangal, India, and has based designs directly on the input of the women themselves. In conducting initial surveys, Professor Chary and his team found that women used public WASH facilities in disproportionately lower numbers than men due to safety concerns, unclean conditions, and the presence of male caretakers. Resultantly, SHE Toilets feature women caretakers, CCTV, ventilation, privacy and mechanisms for disposing of menstrual pads. These changes have seen significant improvements in women’s use of public facilities.

The project is now being scaled up and expanded as part of the Clean India Mission. Entering the next phases, the professor and his colleagues have turned to making facilities inclusive of transgender communities, and elevating menstrual health as a critical component of promoting gender equality.

Putting forth takeaways for the audience, Professor Chary stated that the initiative has rested on the gathering of sex-segregated data, intentional and conscious consideration of gender in planning, budgeting, and implementing the programme, and institutional support for sustained mainstreaming of gender-sensitive programming in national WASH frameworks.

Ms Olivia Boum, KmerPad Cameroon

MHM Trainer and Director of KmerPad Cameroon, Ms Olivia Boum shared her experiences working for women and girls’ empowerment through improving access to menstrual health services in her home country.

Boum stated that the inspiration behind KmerPad lies in the social issues that stem from poor WASH in parts of Cameroon. She has seen that, “many girls cannot go to school because they cannot afford products. Many do not have much guidance and information from their mums and sisters when they start to menstruate”. Beyond this, toilets in schools and other public spaces are often dirty.

To address these issues, the KmerPad team started programmes to distribute and teach women to make washable sanitary pads. They also visit schools to train girls on menstrual health and hygiene. At present, KmerPad are also working with UN Women, UNICEF and Cameroon’s Ministry of Education (MINEDUB) to develop comprehensive menstrual health curriculums for schoolgirls, and to organize discussions in primary schools so that children are informed even before starting menstruation. The team are also contemplating how best to make reusable pads available in schools and to train nurses on instructing children on how to use them.

Looking forward, Ms Boum sees social enterprise ventures in Africa as an avenue for expanding KmerPad’s programming. Her organization is also advocating for the government to help improve public toilet facilities.
Ms Martine Nee, WaterAid Sweden

WaterAid Sweden’s, Ms Martine Nee offered knowledge from her experiences as Programme Manager in initiatives for female-friendly and community toilets in 24 countries around the world. She framed the issue of achieving universal, equitable WASH as a matter of urban planning, “especially as we see there are more and more people living in informal settlements, where there are very big limitations on space and land tenure”.

Through working with local WASH staff at their programme sites, Nee and her colleagues have found that many WASH planners and decision-makers are in need of a comprehensive guide on how to decide, assess, implement, monitor and manage female-friendly public toilets.

In response, WaterAid have formed a guide comprised of four main parts which overview: the need for female-friendly public and community toilets, features of female-friendly toilets, how to assess gaps at city and local levels, and case studies for additional guidance. One of the case studies is from a low-income area called Bashpoti in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In it, a local woman called Rikta speaks of how better guidance and programming helped her small business, showing that gender-sensitive, evidence-based initiatives can result in immediate positive change.

“My business has flourished since the new toilet. Before, I had to close my market stall to go home to use a toilet. Now my business is open all the time – and it has impacted my business a lot. It also helps me to keep clean.”

Rikita

V. CONCLUSIONS

The 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women presented an opportunity to explore how to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment through social protection systems and access to public services, including WASH services. Beyond highlighting the need for improved access to public and private WASH services for women and girls, this side event increased awareness that similar considerations are needed for marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, those living in informal settlements, and refugees.

Attendees were able to hear of progress and lessons learned from countries, international and local organizations, and other global WASH champions. Their efforts bear evidence that cross-sectoral collaboration, behavioral changes, investment, sex-segregated data, guiding policies and frameworks, and conscious efforts to include women in programming are all essential to ensuring women, girls and marginalized groups are not left behind in human rights and development agendas.