Water Sanitation and Hygiene in the Informal Sector
Case studies from Africa and Asia

On March 20th, 2017 the Permanent Missions of Niger and Singapore to the United Nations in New York hosted an event on the sidelines of the 61st Commission on the Status of Women. Co-organized by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and UN Women, this event highlighted the daily sanitation and hygiene challenges faced by women and girls in the informal economy. Evidence from Africa and Asia emphasized the overall neglect of basic services for safety, dignity and good health in marketplaces, offices, transport hubs and public spaces.

The aim of the event was to highlight how poor, inadequate and inappropriate sanitation and hygiene facilities impact women in the informal sector and to identify solutions for addressing these needs.

Co-hosted by the Minister of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection, Republic of Niger¹ and His Excellency Ambassador Burhan Gafoor, Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations, the session was attended by more than 90 participants representing 11 countries (Cameroon, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, India, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Singapore and the United States). The Training and Demographic Research Institute (IFORD), presented research findings including from the new study WSSCC and UN Women’s Joint Programme on West and Central Africa Menstrual Hygiene Management: The Experience of Nomadic and Sedentary Populations in Niger.²

The event was moderated by Archana Patkar, Head of Policy at WSSCC.

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¹ In place of His Excellency Barmou Salifou, Minister of Water and Sanitation of Niger.
² This study is part of a series that includes: Menstrual Hygiene Behaviour: Behaviour and Practices in the Kedougou Region, Senegal and Menstrual Hygiene Behaviour: Behaviour and Practices in Kyé-Ossi and Bamounougoum, Cameroon
In his opening remarks His Excellency Ambassador Burhan Gafoor expressed the importance of this event in the context of the Commission on the Status of Women.

“Singapore is pleased to partner with WSSCC and the Permanent Mission of Niger to the United Nations in New York to bring forward these important issues.”

Ambassador Gafoor

issues. The water and sanitation story is a very key part of Singapore’s development story. This is a transformation that is doable, and it can be done with the right policies and the right support from partners and stakeholders within and outside the country,” Ambassador Gafoor said.

“Safe sanitation is a gateway for dignity, for health and gender equality. If women’s access to sanitation to health and hygiene is neglected, it is my firm conviction, that the implementation of the 2030 agenda is jeopardized,” Ambassador Gafoor said. “As we grapple with SDG goals and 2030 agenda, it is important that we put WASH issues and women’s access to hygiene at the centre of our policies.”

Elback Zeinabou Tari Bako welcomed the participants and guests and highlighted the centrality of safe sanitation, hygiene and water in public spaces to women’s work and economic empowerment. Indeed, despite their presence in various sectors, especially in the informal economy, women do not have access to basic, suitable facilities – which is a direct violation of their rights.

Following this vibrant call to action on sanitation and hygiene, Her Excellency, Minister of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection of Niger, Elback Zeinabou Tari Bako delivered the keynote speech.

In Niger, many girls and women spend time in schools, markets, administrative offices, and yet they cannot use the toilets in those places. Her Excellency expressed the importance of increasing access to WASH facilities beyond the household level, underlining that women spend most of their time outside the home. The situation of women and children in refugee camps is also of concern for the Government of Niger. Important steps were taken for a better inclusion of these concerns into Niger strategic documents especially in the sanitation sector, but more needs to be done. Expressing the regret of her colleague, Niger’s Water and Sanitation Minister, His Excellency Ambassador Burhan Gafoor, Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations in New York. ©Kathleen Ho

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Dr Blaise Eyongsi, Health Geographer and Epidemiologist presented the findings of a study carried out within the framework of the WSSCC/UN Women Joint Programme on Gender, Hygiene and Sanitation in Senegal, Niger and Cameroon. Detailed findings from Niger on the situation of women working in the informal sector as well as the wider region were shared.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the informal sector represents 89.4% of work, including 44% of employed women. This informal economy includes various food-related activities (distribution, preparation, catering) personal services, repairs, recovery and recycling. With an average monthly income in 2012 of 54,850 FCA francs, or 1,828 FCA francs per day (ILO 2012), the loss of earnings is significant for these women who, due to a lack of access to sanitary facilities during their periods, are forced to stay away from their commercial or professional work.
Women are, to varying degrees, particularly active in the informal service sector, such as street food selling and a range of retail services. Dr Eyongsi presented findings from the studies that show the insufficient number of facilities and the poor quality of construction, management and maintenance of these services in all three countries (Cameroon, Niger and Senegal). Women reported dissatisfaction with cleaning and maintenance, and also shared their concerns around personal safety and security while using sanitation services. For example, the study in Niger reported that a large percentage of toilets did not lock from the inside.

Dr Eyongsi also noted the existence of good sanitation and hygiene practices such as handwashing with soap at critical times, the building of separate toilets, some hygienic toilets in school settings and, most importantly, the commitment at the highest levels in the Government of Niger to increase overall access to WASH services.

Following the presentation, moderator Archana Patkar tabled some key thoughts for reflection and further discussion:

At what step on the social economy ladder are women who spend 24/7 at home?

How much more important are the lack of facilities for women in the informal economy who travel several hours to vending destinations and spend the entire day, from 7am or 8pm in market places, with no facilities at all?

How much worse is it for them when they are menstruating or pregnant?

The moderator also expressed her regret that Rama Dhakal, a disability expert from Nepal could not join the event due to an accident that prevented her travel to the CSW. “Rama represents a range of persons with illnesses and disabilities who are rarely consulted. The discussion around access for all must respect the diversity...”
Women’s Access to Sanitation and Hygiene in the Informal Sector

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Session Summary

1. **Burhan Gafoor Retweeted**
   - WSSCC @WSSCCouncil: Mar 17
   - Don’t forget to register for the CSW61 launch of our study on the sanitation needs of women in the informal sector bit.ly/2izwrvf

2. **Rockaya A. @Rockaya**
   - Lovely to see Ambassador @BurhanGafoor wearing the MHM bracelet!!! 😊

3. **Huru International @Hunuchs**
   - Good #MenstrualHygiene involves a woman’s ability to use & dispose of sanitary napkins, change her underwear & wash hands @WSSCCouncil #CSW61

4. **ARCHANA PATKAR @patkararchana**
   - Sans safe sanitation, hygiene & water, the 2030 agenda will be jeopardized @BurhanGafoor @SingaporeUN #NigerPermanentMission @unwomenAfrica

5. **Week Of Compassion @WorldCompassion**
   - Joining delegations from #Niger, #Singapore & @WSSCCouncil to talk access to sanitation for women+girls #CSW61

6. **WSSCC @WSSCCouncil**
   - In Niger’s Tillaberi region, 55% of #women missed #work due to their period - More findings here: bit.ly/2n6qd2B #CSW61 @UN_CSW

55% OF WOMEN IN NIGER* MISSED WORK AS A RESULT OF THEIR PERIOD (TILLABERI REGION)
of human need; we come in different shapes and sizes. How can we continue to have one design for all?” asked Ms Patkar.

The good practices from West and Central Africa showcase the underlying human desire for cleanliness inherent in household and community practices. There is now an urgent need to move into the arena of public facilities which can really set practical benchmarks and quality standards for basic services.

Ms Patkar recognized other personalities present in the room, especially His Excellency Ibrahim Issifi Sadou, Minister for Youth Entrepreneurship of Niger, First Ladies H.E Elizabeth Ongwae from Kisii County, Rocila Awiti from Homabay County, Priscilar Oparanya- Kakamega County and Rosella Rasanga from Siaya County in Kenya and Madame Housseini Hadiza Yacouba Bozari, Deputy Director, Presidential Cabinet, Niger.

Sanitation and Hygiene in public spaces for women: a video from Niger

A video of women vendors in marketplaces in Niger was shown, reminding participants why many working women refuse to share public toilets with their male counterparts preferring not to use them at all. These women explained the daily psycho-social stress they experience, as well as the impact on their health and economic activities. Their clear ask was for adequate facilities for women that are separate, safe, and hygienic and managed by women.

Ms Ndeye Ramatoulaye Dieng, Secretary General of the Ministry of Environment of Senegal raised the issue of management of menstrual waste, which is currently ignored and must be addressed in a systematic way. “It is our collective responsibility to ensure that waste is collected and treated as part of the sustainable development agenda,” Ms Dieng said.

The Director of the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection, Niger highlighted the issue of the sustainability of infrastructure. Many facilities are built in precarious materials and therefore present a risk of collapsing. She also appreciated the movement around menstrual hygiene management (MHM), an issue which is gaining traction. The Government has started an awareness-raising campaign and is making hygiene kits available for girls. However, most are not available in rural areas and the use of reusable menstrual materials is critical.

Ms Sadjo, Director General in the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection of Niger expressed her satisfaction with the discussions. “This is a cross cutting issue that involves all ministries,” she said. “No matter what level we are – we need to focus on this. The other issue is the link to public health and awareness-raising; a lot more needs to be done. The women in the informal sector have less success getting access to services and it is important not to leave them behind. It is also critical to
address WASH during menstruation.”

Joy Lynn Alegarbes, Director of Community at Huru International

shared her experience in Kenya, Tanzania and southern and eastern Africa, expressing her desire to learn more about larger initiatives that target boys, men, families, and the broader community in order to bring about changes in attitude.

Ms Patkar reminded the participants that this was the third year in which a side event on Women and WASH was being held at the Commission on the Status of Women on this issue. She thanked the Mission of Singapore for its consistent support and for its key role in highlighting sanitation and hygiene as critical determinants for development, as well as the Missions and Delegations of Senegal, Niger, India and Kenya.

Most importantly, she called for the elevation of awareness of MHM, an issue surrounded by stigma, taboo and shame that keeps girls out of school and women away from work, and that denies dignity to the biological process that perpetuates humanity itself. She called for MHM to be raised on the agenda at the next Commission on the Status of Women.

In Senegal, Niger and Cameroon, the ministries of education, environment and health, women and child, urban, and water and sanitation are collaboratively engaged on the issue of equitable WASH. WSSCC and its partners are committed to the three-pronged approach of menstrual hygiene management: breaking the silence, safe management of menstruation and the safe disposal of menstrual waste.

Target 6.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls for safe sanitation and hygiene, with a particular focus on women and girls and people living in vulnerable situations. MHM is an integral part of addressing this target, but safe management of menstrual waste also links to 6.3 and underlines the intersectionality of other targets and goals in the SDG framework.

Working with men and boys is essential as demonstrated in several counties in Kenya where men and women MHM trainers have been able to transform mindsets, while respecting local culture and tradition.

Ms Osseini Hadizatou Yacouba, Additional Cabinet Director in the Office of President of Niger and a member of Niger’s National Observatory of Gender, called for more training and educational activities for young girls.

She was followed by Mr Mayank Joshi, Councillor from the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations in New York, who highlighted several best practices in water and sanitation that are changing the lives of millions of people. The Swachh Bharat Mission, launched by the Prime Minister in 2014 for a clean India, is one of the world’s largest sanitation campaigns. The objectives include an Open Defecation Free India, together with improved wastewater management. India is moving at a fast pace with 36 million toilets constructed...
and an objective to cover 10 million households. He underlined the important and substantive challenge of changing behaviour at scale, and asked for more sharing of good practices and examples rooted in indigenous technologies that work.

Mr Vengue Nyirongo from UN Women praised the work that is being done by UN Women and WSSCC in West Africa. “The impact of WASH on the time spent on productive activities is important. The discourse needs to go further to discuss the quality of output and productivity of women involved,” Mr Nyirongo said. He emphasized the cross-cutting nature of sanitation, and how women vendors and traders also lack facilities in the seven countries where UN Women's global programme on economic empowerment is implemented.

In his closing remarks, Ambassador Gafoor recalled that Singapore will continue to champion and advocate for WASH issues, highlighting the centrality of gender considerations. “The role of government is important – but we need a multi-stakeholder approach that brings in private foundations, the private sector and encourages local communities to take action on their own,” he said.

Cabinet, Niger thanked Ambassador Gafoor for his clear intervention outlining a common vision shared by both Niger and Singapore. She emphasized that safe sanitation, hygiene and water for women was a fundamental right and a cross-cutting issue for health, sanitation, entrepreneurs and the environment, and must be treated as such by all concerned ministries.

Dr Chris Williams, Executive Director, WSSCC concluded that the theme of WASH for women and girls can no longer be a side event:

“I call upon representatives from India, Kenya, Niger and Singapore to put forward a formal request to the Commission on the Status of Women in 2018 to make this a core theme – not a side event. I also call upon Member States to formally table a resolution at the next CSW, outlining most of the issues we have discussed today. This is a fundamental problem, this taboo must be broken and people must be serious across all ministries, including gender, water and sanitation, urban, finance, labour – this is a cross-cutting issue, not just a gender issue.

“In the early years in Singapore, many of the public toilet facilities were built by the government and maintenance was ensured. Leadership at the top is also important. Most importantly, changing attitudes start with the men in society. This is not an issue just to be solved by women. Changing attitudes start with men, sons, brothers, fathers, uncles – this is not just a women's issue,” he continued.

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Dr Williams submitted five critical actions to move the agenda forward:

1. The action research conducted in Asia and Africa substantiates the pressing needs of women and girls, we are all speaking from an informed position.

2. Inter-ministerial dialogues on menstrual hygiene and women and WASH have proved to be an effective mechanism in Senegal and also in Niger, Nepal and Kenya. It doesn’t matter which ministry leads – it should be a ‘whole government’ approach.

3. Policy transformation at national level accompanied by guidelines for local operations is possible and doable.

4. We must work more deeply on dedicated training, we must all take the pledge and commit to breaking the taboo, to influencing practices and budgets across all ministries and programmes.

5. Lastly, we need to be smart about monitoring systems; monitor the degree to which each ministry translates their actions into reality on the ground.

The Minister of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection, Ms Elback Zeinabou Tari Bako stressed the need to differentiate these needs by urban and rural contexts given the challenges poor women face in remote and nomadic rural areas. She repeated the Government of Niger’s commitment to enabling women’s access to basic services at home, school and work.

In conclusion, Archana Patkar commended the leadership of the Republic of Niger, one of the three countries of the WSSCC/UN Women Joint Programme in West and Central Africa that has formalized inter-sectoral and inter-ministerial collaboration on menstrual hygiene management, and Singapore’s consistent championing of sanitation as a distinct and important area of focus, and thanked participants for their rich insights.