I. INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, menstruation, psychosocial stress, stigma around fistula, and open defecation were surrounded by secrecy and taboos. In less than a decade, a number of resolutions (14) mentioning gender and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) have been adopted, and issues linked to menstruation and women's and girls' WASH needs are increasingly being discussed globally. Today, menstruation is a key component in the global realization of human rights agendas and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given the significant progress and ever-increasing attention to women's and girls' health and access to WASH, it is time to solidify these efforts and elevate ongoing national developments to the United Nations level.

On 14 September 2018, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and Columbia University convened a side-event at the 39th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC). The event was hosted by the Permanent Missions of Germany, Niger and Spain to the United Nations in Geneva, and attended by the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation who delivered the keynote speech. The session aimed to share best practices and key lessons on WASH policies and programmes that have successfully mainstreamed gender to reinforce evidence-based advocacy for sustainable access to sanitation provisions, including menstrual health for women, girls and forcibly displaced persons. The meeting's conclusions informed deliberations of the Human Rights Council.

The session was attended by over 19 countries including Permanent Missions present in Geneva, civil society organizations, United Nations agencies, and human rights experts.

Priority areas discussed included access to WASH provisions, current Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) knowledge and its integration into educational curriculums, community approaches to promote women's and girls' access to WASH services, MHM in humanitarian situations and global migration, state accountability, the monitoring of WASH indicators, and innovative local initiatives.

The following report represents a synthesis of experts' presentations and discussions.
II. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSION

The session’s objectives were to:

- Reinforce evidence-based advocacy for sustainable access to WASH provisions (water, sanitation and hygiene) for all in public policies by sharing evidence, best practices and innovations in programming and policy at the national level.

- Build a community of stakeholders committed to promoting and fostering menstrual health by discussing how the agenda for the hygiene conditions of women and other stigmatized topics can be advanced at the global level.

- Contribute to the dissemination of recommendations from the most recent report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, Mr Léo Heller, to understand important barriers and solutions for implementing the Human Right to Water and Sanitation for people on the move by exploring roles and responsibilities for various stakeholders.

III. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Ambassador Hans-Peter Jugel, Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations in Geneva

Ambassador Jugel, Deputy Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations in Geneva, opened the session. After introducing the panel’s co-chairs and thanking WSSCC for organizing the event, he spoke about gender mainstreaming in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG6).

“Ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all is a human right indispensable for leading a life in human dignity, and is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights,” stated the Ambassador.

During this 39th session of the HRC, he stressed Germany’s commitment and outlined the shared vision of Permanent Missions that supports a new resolution on the human right to water and sanitation as presented by the governments of Germany and Spain to establish larger-scale, longer-term sustainable water and sanitation programmes. Such will contribute more effectively to the implementation of WASH policies at the global and national levels, paying special attention to women’s and girls’ needs especially during menstruation.

The Ambassador then gave the floor to the Permanent Mission of Niger and session moderator, Mr Garba Issoufou.

“Ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all is a human right indispensable for leading a life in human dignity, and is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights,”

Ambassador Jugel
Mr Garba Issoufou, First Secretary, representing the Ambassador of the Permanent Mission of Niger to the United Nations, welcomed the project for a new resolution at the initiative of the governments of Germany and Spain. He also appreciated the technical support provided by the experts on Gender, Hygiene and Sanitation who supported the Government of Niger in designing the evidence-based policies that will be presented during the session.

The Chad Lake displacement crisis has been destabilizing the south-east region of Niger since 2015. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people, refugees, and returnees are living at ad hoc sites that often lack basic infrastructure, near host populations whose access to water resources and sanitation services is already limited. Forty-eight percent of the population are without access to improved water and sanitation, which aggravates the consequences of Boko Haram attacks and the hunger crisis across the region.

This context has led to poor living conditions for all, which when combined with climate change and limited humanitarian assistance due to insecurity, are increasingly compromising basic WASH needs, especially for women and girls and the most marginalised and disadvantaged.

Given the magnitude and specificities of these needs and the unequal investment in water compared to sanitation and hygiene, the Government of Niger has recently conducted a study to “break the silence” in various contexts (urban, rural, humanitarian, displaced people, refugees, etc.) to give an effective response to the need for information, education and hygiene management. Women’s and girls’ needs have also been integrated into the country’s national policies and budgets.

Mr Leo Heller, Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation

The session provided an opportunity to share the conclusions of the final report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, Léo Heller, which focused on the human right to water and sanitation of forcibly displaced persons.

As Special Rapporteur, Mr. Léo Heller carries out thematic research, undertakes country missions, collects good practices, and works with development practitioners on the implementation of the right to water and sanitation.

For the purposes of the report, forcibly displaced persons are “those who are forced to move, within or across borders, due to armed conflict, persecution, terrorism, human rights violations and abuses, violence, the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters, development projects, or a combination of these factors”. In other words, the study specifically targets those who are unable, for reasons beyond their control, to realize their rights to water and sanitation by their own means and consequently must rely on international and/or national humanitarian assistance. Such mainly include internally
Informing young girls timely about what is happening to their bodies is empowering them for life. @RolfLuyendijk about Menstrual Hygiene Management now at the @WSSCCouncil #HRC39 event in Geneva. @GermanyUNGeneva

Leo Heller, UN Special Rapporteur @SRWaterSan - 14 sept.
I will soon speak at the #HRC39 event on #humanrights to water and sanitation for people on the move, particularly from #gender perspective. Room 30/13 Palais des Nations.

The work of @WSSCCouncil is essential to advance water and sanitation. Access to these services is about human dignity, especially for women, girls and people on the move. Ambassador Jügel, @GermanyUNGeneva #HRC39

WSSCC @WSSCCouncil - 14 sept.
We must fight against stigma and help people on the move to have access to water and sanitation. We need to improve policies and implement more programmes in the countries. Garba Issoufou, Permanent Mission of Niger now at the @WSSCCouncil side event #HRC39

Mark your calendars and join our session on Realizing The Human Rights to Water and Sanitation on Friday 14 September at 13:30 pm in Palais de Nations – RSVP. For more info: wsscc.org/resources-fed...

FRIDAY 14 SEP 2018
13h30 - 15h00
Palais des Nations, Room XXVII
Geneva, Switzerland
RSVP by 12 September
anthony.delasource@wsscc.org

Realizing the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation
Tackling stigma and discrimination: From menstruation to access to WASH for people on the move
displaced persons, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in a vulnerable situation while en route, at borders and at reception.

The Special Rapporteur highlighted the misalignment of humanitarian provisions with human rights, as well as the increased attention on water displacement. Those who are forced to move, within or across borders, due to armed conflict, persecution, terrorism, human rights violations and abuses, violence, the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters, development projects, or a combination of these factors

Mr. Leo Heller

PRESENTATIONS

Ms Inga Winkler, Human Rights Expert, Columbia University (NY)

Ms. Inga Winkler, Human Rights Expert from Columbia University, opened the first presentation by highlighting the majority number of men in a panel that advocates women’s rights. She accordingly stated that “the education of men on the subject of women’s rights is a crucial step towards ending gender inequality”. Ms Winkler highlighted the increased attention that has been given to menstruation in the draft new resolution, which compared to previous resolutions contains more complexity and detail on the topic. The adoption of resolutions and policy development is important because it influences budgets, programmes and services, and provides a basis for accountability. Moreover, “adopting language on menstruation has an important effect on normalizing and de-stigmatizing menstruation,” Ms Winker said. Sharing lessons learned and encouraging others to adopt similar policies is an effective way to mainstream a gender perspective.

Ms. Winkler acknowledged that the WASH sector has proven to be a tremendously powerful entry point, but stressed that menstruation reaches far beyond WASH. It has far-reaching impacts on girls’ ability to succeed inside and outside school, and on women’s economic and public participation. “We need to explore further links in the context of the human rights to health, education, culture, religion, environment,
“We need to explore further links in the context of the human rights to health, education, culture, religion, environment, labour rights, gender equality and many other areas”

Ms Inga Winker

labour rights, gender equality and many other areas,” added Ms Winker. She also asked for the challenges faced by individuals subject to multiple and overlapping forms of disempowerment and discrimination to be acknowledged and addressed. She stressed that to take the promise to Leave No One Behind seriously, we need to understand how disability, residence, being deprived of liberty, caste, age, socio-economic status, occupation, migrant and refugee status, gender identify and many other identities influence experiences of menstruation and individual needs.

Adopting a human rights perspective to menstrual health means stressing the agency of people who menstruate, enabling them to decide how they want to cope on the days they menstruate, what activities and cultural and religious practices they do want to engage in or not, what materials or products they want to use, and anything else that influences their experience of menstruation. Substantive equality requires enabling everyone to take these decisions in an informed way and not to be judged for them.

Ms Khady Sonkho, MHM Trainer in West and Central Africa, Louga (Senegal)

Ms Khady Sonkho participated in the discussion through Skype, and walked the audience though a presentation about Senegal’s current situation and more specifically the Louga region to describe the context of WASH interventions, strategies developed at local level, and results achieved through these programmes.

Senegal is the fourth largest economy in the southern region of West Africa. The estimated 2018 population of Senegal is 16.29 million, i.e. 72nd in the world. Fifty-one percent of Senegal’s population are women, and more than 42% of the population lives in rural areas. Senegal’s population is currently growing at 2.6% per year, and the average births per woman is 5.03.

Louga is a city and region of Senegal with 835,325 inhabitants of which 52% are women. Despite the progress that women have made in education, health and political power, discouraging levels of gender discrimination persist, making gender parity a distant goal. The school completion rate among girls is 43%, which contributes to the nearly 70% illiteracy rate among women. The majority of women in the region also engage in unpaid work, usually related to agriculture and animal herding activities.

One of the least discussed yet most pervasive stigmas in gender equality is menstruation. The average woman menstruates for 3000 days in her lifetime, but the subject is constrained by taboos that exclude women from certain activities that keep them at home, prevent girls from learning how to manage their periods hygienically, and contributes to the prevalence of early marriage, despite being prohibited by international law.

The situation is often worse at markets and other public spaces. The provision of toilets is generally insufficient at Senegalese health centres – often only one toilet serves the needs of multiple patients, and is not adapted for people with disabilities. Some factors that contribute to keeping girls away from school during their menstruation include lack of toilet cleanliness – cleaned only once a day or even twice a week - the non-availability of water and sanitary napkins, and lack of support and understanding of the issue.

Given the expressed need for more context-based assessment of WASH services, Ms Khady Sonkbo captured the audience’s attention by highlighting the current sanitation facility situation facing girls at school and women at markets, health centres and other public places.

As a reference, access to drinking water is 97% in urban areas but only 73% in rural areas. Over half of schools lack toilets, and the pupil-toilet ratio is rarely respected. For schools that have toilet facilities, such are poorly maintained and not adapted for people with disabilities.

The situation is often worse at markets and other public spaces. The provision of toilets is generally insufficient at Senegalese health centres – often only one toilet serves the needs of multiple patients, and is not adapted for people with disabilities. Such toilets are poorly maintained, as cleaning and maintenance is typically lacking.

Ms Khady Sonkho. ©WSSCC/ Javier Acebal

Ms Khady Sonkho, MHM Trainer in West and Central Africa, Louga (Senegal)
However, strategies and inspiring projects developed at the local level are underway, and Ms Sonkho explained how the Louga trainers have changed the perception of menstruation from one of stigma to pride. Since 2014, 500 local actors have been trained in education and health issues – and have organized MHM labs to provide information, communication and education to thousands of women, men, boys and girls in the region. Nearly 6,000 people have been trained or sensitized on the issue; 500 of which are people living with disabilities. The trainers used tools developed by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) to give training on MHM, some of which were successfully regionally adapted.

Thanks to such trainings and advocacy by Louga trainers, local communities have broken the silence and dare to speak publicly about menstruation and WASH needs. Women and girls discuss the topic without fear and get the information they need about their cycle, and menstrual hygiene is addressed during budget discussions by local government.

Community leaders have welcomed the involvement of men and political authorities. Local administrative and religious authorities influenced and supported the integration of MHM into the local agenda. As a result, medical inspection units mobilized resources for menstrual hygiene management at schools: sanitary napkins have been introduced at schools so that girls can stay at school during their menstruation (IME). Media organizations have covered awareness-raising activities.

The trainers have learned from this experience with the WSSCC/UN Women Joint Programme on Gender, Hygiene and Sanitation. They are now supporting other regional initiatives funded by other institutions and the Government of Senegal, where Louga trainers are invited to attend and speak at conferences and panels.

Mr Labo Madougou, Director of Development and Extension of Sanitation Services from the Water and Sanitation Ministry of Niger

Mr Labo Madougou, Director of Development and Extension of Sanitation Services from the Water and Sanitation Ministry of Niger, on behalf of the Ministry of Hydraulics and Sanitation of the Government of Niger gave a presentation on the sustainable access of WASH services in public policy. He focused on the state of WASH in Niger, as well as the inclusion of MHM-related indicators into public policy documents.

As of July 2018, Niger’s 21,466,863 population comprises 49.9% men and 50.1% women. In 2017, the country recorded 1.25% optimal access to quality water services, 22.06% basic access (guaranteed quality water access within thirty minutes of user’s abode), 47.54% inadequate access, and 29.15% zero access (surface water).

In 2016, 1549 or 4.5% villages were declared open-defecation free (ODF). The goal of the national and international agenda is to end ODF in about 30,000 villages by 2030. In 2017, people are still experiencing low access to sanitation services - with over 13 million still practicing open defecation. Only 2.6% of the population has optimal access to adequate toilets and hand-washing facilities, 6.2% has basic access to individual adequate toilets, 4.9% has minimal access to shared adequate toilets, 17.5% has inadequate access to toilets with risk of human contamination, and 68.9% still practice open defecation.

In line with the internationally-agreed indicators for SDG6, Niger’s Ministry of Water and Sanitation launched the Programme Sectoriel Eau Hygiène et Assainissement (PROSEHA) for the period 2016 to 2030 – which serves as a reference document for the government and other stakeholders in the WASH sector.

With the support of the WSSCC/UN Women Joint Programme on Gender, Hygiene and Sanitation, the ministry integrated MHM indicators into various public policy documents and sectoral strategies. In collaboration with all the sector ministries involved in WASH - including gender, health, and environment - a set of tools were developed to effectively address MHM. The ministry also organized high level advocacy sessions involving 54 technical managers, NGOs and associations; and 11 national deputies and 11 health agents were invited to attend MHM labs. More importantly,
Closing the session, the Executive Director of WSSCC Mr Rolf Luyendijk congratulated the participants for their quality of work and research, encouraging them to actively prepare for achieving the SDG6 targets. Mr Luyendijk invited participants to strengthen awareness-raising and actions to promote women’s and girls’ access to WASH services, including MHM. “Informing a girl in good time about what’s happening in her body is empowering her,” observed Mr Luyendijk.

Ensuring the policy integration, coherence and coordination of WASH and other relevant sector and social policies such as gender equality, health, and education can accelerate progress and reinforce synergies between the gender-related SDG6 targets.

The executive director concluded by calling for action on making safe, hygienic and private menstruation a global priority, with targeted advocacy, funding and policies. “By lifting the veil of silence, we open the door to action that can transform the lives of women and girls around the world” he concluded.

**IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The 39th session of the Human Rights Council represented an opportunity to raise awareness about the human right to water and sanitation, and to share best practices emerging from various countries. At this session, the permanent missions of Spain and Germany also co-sponsored a resolution on the human right to water and sanitation, which places particular attention on women’s and girls’ needs especially during menstruation. This side event was an important milestone, as it supported the advocacy efforts of countries championing WASH for women and girls.

During the presentation and debates, the audience had the opportunity to note the important progress in countries where the silence and stigma previously associated with menstruation have been progressively eliminated thanks to trainings, advocacy, research and evidence-based policies. The realization of women’s and girls’ right to water and sanitation now requires increased and channelled funding and programmes that pay a special attention to women and girls needs.

---

**Mr Rolf Luyendijk, WSSCC Executive Director**

“By lifting the veil of silence, we open the door to action that can transform the lives of women and girls around the world”

Mr Rolf Luyendijk

---

**ABOUT THE REPORT**

Acknowledgements to the speakers:
Ms. Ms. Inga Winker  
Mr. Rolf Luyendijk  
Ambassador Hans-Peter Jugel  
Mr. Garba Issoufou  
Mr. Labo Madougou  
Ms. Khady Sonko  
Mr. Léo Heller

Thanks for their help:
Emily Deschaine  
Camila Souza

Prepared by:
Rockaya Aidara  
Anthony Dedouche  
Sara Navarro

Production:
Stéphanie Gomez de la Torre

©2018 Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC)

Hosted by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)