WATER, WORK, AND WOMEN'S TIME: FEMINIST PATHWAYS FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE WASH IN AFRICA

A white paper by ActionAid International, Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF), Young Urban Women's Movements and Africa Cares Together Community of Practice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) challenges are among Africa's most pressing development concerns. They undermine public health, economic productivity, peace, and gender equality. Across the continent, inadequate infrastructure, male-dominated governance, financing shortfalls, entrenched cultural norms, climate change, and conflict perpetuate systemic exclusion. These barriers are visible in rural villages, peri-urban settlements, and high-density urban areas, where women and girls bear the disproportionate burden of water collection and unpaid care work.

This White Paper, jointly developed by ActionAid International and, Young Urban Women MOvemnt the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF), unpacks the 42nd GIMAC theme from a feminist perspective. It highlights the structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality in water access and governance, and calls for sustainable, gender-transformative solutions. Local evidence, such as ESRF's 2025 baseline study in Kishapu District, Tanzania, and from ActionAid Ethiolioa through the African Cares Togtrher (Act) Program illustrates the tangible burdens faced by women and girls, but these realities are replicated across Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2025, the African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of State and Government adopted the theme for 2026: “Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063” (Assembly/AU/Dec.912(XXXVIII)). This theme reflects the recognition that water and sanitation are not only development priorities but also determinants of peace, security, and gender equality across Africa.

Water scarcity is estimated to cost the continent **US$200 billion annually**, equivalent to up to **5 per cent of GDP**, while three out of four jobs in Africa remain water-dependent (AMCOW, 2016). The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2022) reports that 411 million Africans lack basic drinking water services and 779 million lack basic sanitation. These deficits undermine public health, economic productivity, and social stability.

The burden of this crisis is borne disproportionately by women and girls, who collectively spend an estimated **40 billion hours annually** collecting water in Sub-Saharan Africa (UN Women, 2021). This represents a colossal loss of opportunity for education, income generation, and civic participation. **The Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy (AWVP63),** to be launched at the 39th AU Assembly in February 2026, provides a continental framework for inclusive, climate-resilient water security. However, without deliberate gender-transformative interventions, the AU’s commitments risk perpetuating systemic exclusion and instability.

WASH AS A CONTINENTAL CHALLENGE

Women and girls remain the primary managers of household water across all settings. In rural villages, they walk long distances to collect water; in peri-urban and high-density urban areas, they queue for hours at overcrowded public taps or rely on expensive private vendors. These realities perpetuate **time poverty**, limit educational attainment, and reduce women’s participation in economic and political life.

The ESRF 2025 baseline study in Kishapu District, Tanzania illustrates this burden: mothers undertake nearly 40 per cent of water collection, compared to 11.8 per cent by fathers, with households traveling up to 15 kilometres for water. In peri-urban and urban informal settlements across Africa, similar patterns emerge, with women spending hours daily managing water access under precarious conditions. These findings demonstrate that the gendered burden of WASH is continental, cutting across geographic and socio-economic divides.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Africa's WASH crisis is shaped by interconnected structural barriers that reinforce exclusion and inequality.

- **Financing Shortfalls and Structural Injustice -** The continent faces an annual **US$30 billion water investment gap** (Cape Town Declaration, 2025), even as it loses over **US$88 billion** annually through illicit financial flows (UNECA, 2015). At the same time, African countries continue to service debts rooted in colonial and post-colonial exploitation, diverting scarce revenues away from social investment. This underscores the demand for **reparative justice**, recognizing that historical injustices have constrained Africa's fiscal space and undermined its capacity to deliver essential services such as water and sanitation. Climate change compounds these inequities: Africa contributes less than **4 per cent of global emissions,** yet bears disproportionate impacts in the form of droughts, floods, and water scarcity. The unpaid climate debt owed by the Global North represents a structural injustice, as industrialized nations profit from carbon-intensive development while African communities—particularly women and girls—pay the price through increased WASH burdens. As ActionAid's ***Who Owes Who?*** asserts, "Africa is not poor, it is being impoverished." Redirecting unpaid debts—whether through recovery of illicit financial flows, cancellation of illegitimate loans, or reparative climate finance—into WASH is both a moral obligation and a pathway to dignity, equality, and Agenda 2063.

- **Infrastructure Deficits and Unequal Distribution -** Infrastructure expansion has failed to keep pace with demographic growth, urbanization, and climate pressures. Rural households often travel long distances to water sources, while peri-urban and high-density urban communities contend with overcrowded, unreliable, or unsafe public water points. Rapid urbanization has created sprawling informal settlements where systems are overstretched, and climate change intensifies these vulnerabilities, fueling fragility, social unrest, and resource-based conflict.

- **Governance Exclusion and Gendered Norms -** Formal water governance structures remain dominated by men, despite women being the primary managers of household water. Women's experiential knowledge—often shared informally at water points—is excluded from decision-making processes. In Kishapu, ESRF found that 83.9 per cent of women engage in informal problem-solving discussions, yet their voices are absent from community water committees. This exclusion reflects a broader continental pattern. Entrenched cultural norms further reinforce gendered roles, assigning water collection and care work to women and girls, limiting men's participation, and perpetuating time poverty.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT: DRIVERS AND FRUITS OF WASH CHALLENGES

Climate change and conflict form a vicious cycle with WASH challenges, acting both as **drivers** of crisis and as **fruits** of inadequate systems. Rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, and erratic rainfall reduce safe water availability, while floods destroy sanitation infrastructure and contaminate supplies. Africa, contributing less than 4 per cent of global emissions, bears disproportionate impacts of climate change, an injustice compounded by the **unpaid climate debt owed by the Global North** (UNFCCC, 2022).Conflict directly worsens WASH conditions by destroying infrastructure, displacing populations, and weakening governance. In conflict-affected areas, water points are neglected or targeted, leaving communities without safe access. Displacement camps often lack sanitation, exposing women and girls to heightened risks of disease and gender-based violence (AU Transitional Justice Policy, 2019).

At the same time, inadequate WASH becomes a **fruit of conflict,** fueling instability. In rural areas, competition over scarce water resources drives community disputes; in peri-urban and high-density urban settlements, overcrowded water points spark unrest. At the transboundary level, shared basins such as the Nile and Niger remain flashpoints of geopolitical tension (AMCOW, 2016).

Women and girls stand at the centre of this cycle, carrying the heaviest burdens while excluded from decision-making. Breaking it requires embedding WASH into climate resilience and peacebuilding frameworks, recognizing water and sanitation as determinants of stability, justice, and equality across Africa.

FEMINIST PATHWAYS FOR SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

ActionAid and ESRF propose a feminist framework for addressing WASH challenges, grounded in AU commitments and global human rights standards. WASH must be treated as a public good, financed progressively, governed inclusively, and embedded in climate and peacebuilding strategies. Infrastructure investments should reduce unpaid care work, while grassroots women’s movements must be resourced to lead advocacy and service delivery.

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

African Union Member States, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and development partners should:

- **Financing Justice for WASH -** WASH must be treated as a **public good**, not a commodity. Africa's chronic underfunding can be closed by reclaiming justice, thai is, end the **US$88 billion lost annually to illicit financial flows** (UNECA, 2015), cancel illegitimate debts rooted in colonial exploitation, and demand the **unpaid climate and reparative justice debts owed by the Global North** (UNFCCC, 2022; ActionAid, Who Owes Who?). Redirecting these stolen and unpaid resources into WASH is a moral obligation and a pathway to dignity, equality, and Agenda 2063.
- **Embed WASH into peacebuilding and transitional justice frameworks**, protect water infrastructure in conflict zones, and strengthen transboundary cooperation.
- **Integrate WASH into key national strategic plans.** Enuring that WASH is intergrated in climate adaptation plans, invest in resilient infrastructure, and secure climate finance commitments owed to Africa.
- **Institutionalize women's leadership in water governance -** this will reduce unpaid care work through accessible infrastructure, and resource grassroots women's movements.
- **Collect and use gender-disaggregated data in WASH monitoring systems** to strengthen accountability and tracking mechanisms.

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