

# Call to Action for Rights-based Protection of Global Water and Ensuring Women in All of Their Diversity Are at Decision-Making Tables



**WE CAN**

Women's Earth & Climate Action Network, International

Sustaining the health and wellbeing of all life on our planet is impossible without water, and women in all their diversity are central to realizing this imperative. However, current over-exploitation, extractive relationships to and mismanagement of water contribute to an ever-worsening water crisis. Globally, studies predict the number of people living in severely water-scarce regions will rise to approximately 3.2 billion (an increase from approximately 1.9 billion people around 2015) by 2050.<sup>1</sup> Generally, at the current rate of water over-consumption and exploitation, studies show the demand for water will exceed its supply by 40 per cent in 2030.<sup>2</sup> These concerns are even more stark when taking gender into account. Due to unequal gender norms globally, women have been and continue to be impacted disproportionately more within these figures.<sup>3</sup>

The collective health and wellbeing of our communities is at stake with a growing water crisis. Reports show that the rate of progress toward reaching universal access to drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene by 2030 has been far too slow.<sup>4</sup> Globally, over 2 billion people drink contaminated water daily,<sup>5</sup> while over 800,000 people die yearly from drinking contaminated water and not being able to properly wash their hands.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic brought the water crisis even more to the forefront of concern as community responses to a public health crisis were severely limited by lack of safe, affordable, and sanitary water.<sup>7</sup> Access to safe water and sanitation in urban areas is also decreasing due to rapid urbanization outpacing public services.<sup>8</sup> For women who also serve as the predominant care-givers within households and communities, relationships and responsibilities around water are integral to maintaining their health and wellbeing and those for whom they provide.

Detrimental impacts of climate change and the extractive industries that are a central cause are a central cause of water pollution,<sup>9</sup> and this continued degradation has also contributed to the destructive power of water. Droughts and floods damage communities worldwide, while greenhouse gas levels further burden water systems which have already

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<sup>1</sup>Lucier, K. J., & Qadir, M. (2018). Gender and Community Mainstreaming in Fog Water Collection Systems. *Water*, 10(10), 1472. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>2</sup> UNEP. (2016). Half the World to Face Severe Water Stress by 2030 unless Water Use is "Decoupled" from Economic Growth, Says International Resource Panel. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>3</sup> UN Women. (2022). Explainer: How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>4</sup> Smith, D.M., Gordon, C., Kittikhoun, A. et al. (2023). Research and innovation missions to transform future water systems. *Nat Water* 1, 219–222. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>5</sup> Barlow, M., & Grant, M. (2021). Water is a human right. *Peace and Freedom*, 81(2), 10-11. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>6</sup> Al Jazeera. (2017). More than half a billion globally 'have no clean water.' [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>7</sup> Barlow, M., & Grant, M. (2021). Water is a human right. *Peace and Freedom*, 81(2), 10-11. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>8</sup> UN Water. (n.d.) Eliminating discrimination and inequalities in access to water and sanitation. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>9</sup> The Gaia Foundation. (2016). *UnderMining the Water Cycle: Extractive Industries and a Planetary Water Crisis*. [\[LINK\]](#)

been impacted by rising demand, over-exploitation, and climate degradation.<sup>10</sup> Women are disparately affected by these climate disasters, as after occurrences like floods and monsoons, women face higher rates of both sexual violence and health problems, and studies have shown that due to societal gender inequality more women die from disaster events than men.<sup>11</sup>

Privatization of water also creates risks and barriers to safe access, as low-income households, particularly those headed by women, struggle to pay large lump sums for water bills.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, water advocates, water stewards, and Indigenous communities emphasize that water is a human right and a common good, establishing that an economic or market value for water is impossible to determine, and that water should not be treated as a commodity.<sup>13</sup>

Grassroots, Indigenous and policy advocacy leaders the world over call for a change in the tide regarding our protection of and relationship to water. Women in all their diversity are at the forefront of this crisis, both in dealing with its effects and in building and engaging in effective solutions. However, women and gender diverse people have not been equitably included in policy-making, and thus gendered needs and impacts of addressing water access, safety, health, and more have been neglected.<sup>14</sup> As global policies have not adequately served to slow the rise in the water crisis nor orient toward a respectful relationship with water as a life source, we must implement a gender-conscious, rights-based, and climate-justice way forward.

## The Connection Between Climate, Water and Gender

Unequal gender norms ensure that globally, women in all their diversity continue to be the most adversely impacted by water and climate crises.<sup>15</sup> Indigenous, Black and Brown women, women from low-income communities, and women from the Global South bear an even heavier burden of climate impacts and other crises due to the historic and continuing impacts of colonialism, racism and misogyny.<sup>16</sup> The importance of women's leadership in

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, D.M., Gordon, C., Kittikhoun, A. et al. (2023). Research and innovation missions to transform future water systems. *Nat Water* 1, 219–222. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>11</sup> Schueman, L. J. (2022, March 22). *Why women are key to solving the climate crisis*. One Earth. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>12</sup> Gender CC Women for Climate Justice. (n.d.). *Water, gender and climate change*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>13</sup> Bonecini, L. & Kishimoto, S. (2018, April 4). *Resistance and defence of water and territories in Brazil*. Transnational Institute. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>14</sup> McDonald, K. (2011, September 26). *Women & the right to water - High Level Panel*. WEDO. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>15</sup> Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (2022). *Why Women*. [\[LINK\]](#). And UN Women. (2022). *Explainer: How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>16</sup> Women's Earth and Climate Network. (2022, September). *Responding to the Climate Emergency: A Call to Action for People and Planet*. [\[LINK\]](#)

response to the climate and water crises has been long-documented.<sup>17</sup> However, as of October 2022 organizations like the UN still reported limited awareness of the links between water, climate, and gender.<sup>18</sup>

Women in all their diversity serve as primary water collectors and protectors in many communities. Globally 29% of people do not have water inside their homes,<sup>19</sup> creating a significant need for water collection. Studies over the past decades found that women are responsible for completing 80% of water-related tasks.<sup>20</sup> Thus, addressing water needs can consume the entire day for women, as nothing essential can be done without water. UNICEF estimated that within a day around the world, the amount of time women collectively spend collecting water equals about 200 million hours (or more than 22,800 years).<sup>21</sup> Yet states still fail to prioritize the disproportionate burden that women carry as water collectors.<sup>22</sup>

Women are often the primary caretakers of their families and communities, with women in all their diversity spending up to ten times more time on unpaid care work than men.<sup>23</sup> Water is of essential use in care labor like cooking and cleaning, and women use water for subsistence agriculture, small livestock rearing, and home industries.<sup>24</sup> Water systems that are polluted by extractive industries heavily impact women who rely on these systems for the health and wellbeing of themselves and their communities. As droughts, floods and other erratic weather events escalate globally, there is an increased burden on those who hold responsibility for their families' water and livelihood needs.<sup>25</sup>

Underlying these responsibilities is the sacred relationship that especially Indigenous communities acknowledge between water and women. Many Indigenous women care for water and understand water as a living relative to whom humans have a responsibility.<sup>26</sup> For generations, women have continued in the protection and use of water globally,

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<sup>17</sup> UN Women. (2022). *Explainer: How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>18</sup>United Nations. (2022, October). *United Nations 2023 Water Conference Global Online Stakeholder Consultation for the Proposed Themes of the Interactive Dialogues: Summary Report*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>19</sup> Spronk, S. (n.d.). COVID-19 and Structural Inequalities: Class, Gender, Race and Water Justice. In D. A. McDonald, et al (Eds.), *Public Water and COVID-19: Dark Clouds and Silver Linings* (pp. 25-48). Transnational Institute. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>20</sup> Pavelich, K. (2017). Water Privatization: A Threat to Human Rights? *Global Societies Journal*, 5. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>21</sup> Spronk, S. (n.d.). COVID-19 and Structural Inequalities: Class, Gender, Race and Water Justice. In D. A. McDonald, et al (Eds.), *Public Water and COVID-19: Dark Clouds and Silver Linings* (pp. 25-48). Transnational Institute. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>22</sup> UN Water. (n.d.) *Eliminating discrimination and inequalities in access to water and sanitation*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>23</sup> Gaëlle Ferrant, Luca Maria Pesando and Keiko Nowacka, "Unpaid Care Work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes," 2014, [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>24</sup> Gender CC Women for Climate Justice. (n.d.). *Water, gender and climate change*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>25</sup> Bernadette Vallye, "Gender and the Climate Change Agenda: The Impacts of Climate Change on Women and Public Policy," 2010, [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>26</sup> Barker, J. (2019). Confluence: Water as an Analytic of Indigenous Feminisms. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 43(3). [\[LINK\]](#)

emphasizing respect for water with a sacred connection to physical and spiritual wellbeing. While a human right to water has been established, proper implementation of this right cannot exclude a relationship to water based upon respect, rather than exploitation and extraction of water.

Women's responsibility and relationship to water is amplified by the disproportionate burdens created by structural social inequities. While grassroots, feminist, women-led, and Indigenous groups implement and inform transformative action for climate protection globally,<sup>27</sup> entrenched inequities leave them out of decision-making, reinforce dangerous conditions for them, and continue to dispossess them of fundamental connections to environmental and climate justice. Countless studies have shown that when women hold positions of leadership at all levels, entire communities and nature benefit.<sup>28</sup> Women and gender diverse people are primary leaders of frontline efforts to stop harmful extractive industries, and face additional risks of gender-based violence and threats as they fight to protect their communities and territories.<sup>29</sup> With water justice as central to this moment, structural injustices of systems that were not built by and for women and gender diverse people must be addressed by making their voices and leadership primary in combating the water crisis.

## Key Areas of Concern

As detailed, the water crisis is a global issue, which has resulted in a lack of sufficient water of good quality to meet basic human requirements, with women in all their diversity being disproportionately impacted. While the below considerations provide a narrow representation of examples, the water crisis is worldwide in nature, affects both rural and urban settings, and is significantly impacted by gender and socioeconomic disparities and structural barriers.

- **Access:** Clean and safe water access has been established as a human right.<sup>30</sup> Yet, this access has not been met globally. As primary caregivers, providers and/or water collectors in many communities, women disproportionately deal with the access issues that result from the global water crisis. For people who are pregnant or have just given birth, this burden is only multiplied.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> United Nations. (2022, October). *United Nations 2023 Water Conference Global Online Stakeholder Consultation for the Proposed Themes of the Interactive Dialogues: Summary Report*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>28</sup> UN Women Watch, "Fact Sheet: Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change," n.d., [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>29</sup> Women's Earth and Climate Action Network, "Gendered and Racial Impacts of the Fossil Fuel Industry in North America and Complicit Financial Institutions: A Call to Action for the Health of Our Communities and Nature in the Climate Crisis," 2021, [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>30</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *Water*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>31</sup> Caruso, B.A. (2023). Water is life, particularly for women. *Nat Water* 1, 124 (2023). [\[LINK\]](#)

- In sub-Saharan Africa as high as 73% of people do not have water inside their homes,<sup>32</sup> and in 24 countries, an estimated 13.54 million women are responsible for water collection in households with collection times greater than 30 minutes<sup>33</sup>
  - About 700 million people could be displaced by intense water scarcity by 2030,<sup>34</sup> and already about 80% of people displaced by climate change are women.<sup>35</sup>
  - Warming climate has decreased rain and snowfall in the Navajo Nation and nearby Hopi tribal lands in Arizona, this and higher evaporation rates have dried up 98 percent of the surface water access over the past century, where women have reported this will lead to losing their traditional practices.<sup>36</sup>
- **Health:** Contamination of water and lack of access to adequate sanitation must be counteracted in order to improve the health of communities worldwide. Additionally, women who menstruate as well as deal with stress and stigma around sanitation are disproportionately affected by these concerns.
    - Canada issued 116 Drinking Water Advisories, and 73% of First Nations water and wastewater systems inspected were deemed at high or medium risk for various types of contamination;<sup>37</sup> while First Nations women seek to rebuild sacred connection to water.<sup>38</sup>
    - A dozen African countries reported the increased water burdens due to the new hygiene practices of COVID-19.<sup>39</sup> In one study, 73% of respondents stated women and girls could not afford to manage their periods during the pandemic.<sup>40</sup>
    - Mental health stress related to water acquisition, use, storage, and management for women is associated with depression, emotional distress, and psychosomatic symptoms.<sup>41</sup> Women and girls are also particularly likely

<sup>32</sup> Spronk, S. (n.d.). COVID-19 and Structural Inequalities: Class, Gender, Race and Water Justice. In D. A. McDonald, et al (Eds.), *Public Water and COVID-19: Dark Clouds and Silver Linings* (pp. 25-48). Transnational Institute. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>33</sup> Graham J.P., Hirai M., Kim S-S. (2016). An Analysis of Water Collection Labor among Women and Children in 24 Sub-Saharan African Countries. *PLoS ONE* 11(6). [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>34</sup> UNICEF. (n.d.) *Water scarcity: Addressing the growing lack of available water to meet children's needs.* [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>35</sup> Schueman, L. J. (2022, March 22). *Why women are key to solving the climate crisis.* One Earth. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>36</sup> Narang, S. (2018, May 25). *Navajo women struggle to preserve traditions as climate change intensifies.* The World. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, K., Clow, B., & Haworth-Brockman, M. (2013). Carriers of water: aboriginal women's experiences, relationships, and reflections. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 60. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>38</sup> Cave, K. & McKay, S. (2016, December 12). *Water Song: Indigenous Women and Water.* Resilience. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>39</sup> Amuakwa-Mensah, F., et al. (2021). COVID-19 and handwashing: Implications for water use in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Water Resources and Economics*, 36. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>40</sup> Benini, D. (2021, January 18). *The gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls.* Water Aid. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>41</sup> Tallman, P. S., et al. (2022). Water insecurity and gender-based violence: A global review of the evidence. *WIREs Water*, 10. [\[LINK\]](#)

to experience feelings of shame, guilt, and humiliation in the context of water deprivation.<sup>42</sup>

- **Physical Safety:** “Gender-based water violence” has become specifically concerning,<sup>43</sup> as water insecurity and gender-based violence is significantly linked globally. This includes risk of sexual and physical violence for women water collectors, intimate partner violence initiated from water inadequacy, as well as the threat of international conflict.<sup>44</sup>
  - Long distances to and isolation at water sources create physical risk for water collectors. Additionally, predictability of water gathering schedules, and physical conditions of water collection routes have shown to increase targeting women for violence.<sup>45</sup>
  - Compared to women with optimal water access, women with intermediate water access had a 10% higher probability of their husbands inflicting emotional violence and humiliation upon them in some areas.<sup>46</sup>
  - Water scarcity is increasingly becoming a trigger for conflicts,<sup>47</sup> and water-related disasters (e.g., floods and droughts) destroy livelihoods and infrastructure, which can create intra-community conflict,<sup>48</sup> of which women and gender diverse people suffer the worst impacts.
  
- **Leadership:** Lack of leadership of women in water work and infrastructure creates systemic barriers to accessing water. Women and gender diverse people can also face social barriers to leadership due to cultural norms against women speaking in public, and stigma around sanitation.<sup>49</sup>
  - Less than 50 countries have laws and policies that specifically mention women's participation for rural sanitation and water resources management.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Wutich, A., Brewis, A. & Tsai, A. (2020). Water and mental health. *WIREs Water*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>43</sup> Tallman, P. S., et al. (2022). Water insecurity and gender-based violence: A global review of the evidence. *WIREs Water*, 10. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>44</sup> Tallman, P. S., et al. (2022). Water insecurity and gender-based violence: A global review of the evidence. *WIREs Water*, 10. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>45</sup> Tallman, P. S., et al. (2022). Water insecurity and gender-based violence: A global review of the evidence. *WIREs Water*, 10. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>46</sup> Choudhary, N., et al. (2020). Sub-optimal household water access is associated with greater risk of intimate partner violence against women: evidence from Nepal. *Journal of Water and Health*, 18(4). [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>47</sup> Gender CC Women for Climate Justice. (n.d.). *Water, gender and climate change*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>48</sup> Tallman, P. S., et al. (2022). Water insecurity and gender-based violence: A global review of the evidence. *WIREs Water*, 10. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>49</sup> UN Water. (n.d.) *Eliminating discrimination and inequalities in access to water and sanitation*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>50</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2023, January). *Reference Material for Gender Mainstreaming in the Water Resources Sector*. [\[LINK\]](#)

- Women account for less than 15% of the water workforce in the U.S.<sup>51</sup>
- Less than half of countries who reported gender mainstreaming in water laws and policies specifically mentioned women's participation in resource management and rural sanitation.<sup>52</sup>
- **Privatization:** Corporatization and privatization both of water itself and of water management adds further pressure to water distribution with unjust consequences.<sup>53</sup> Privatization also restricts sacred relationships to water, especially of Indigenous women in all their diversity.
  - Corporations engage in “water grabbing” of up to 454 billion cubic meters per year globally,<sup>54</sup> which affects sources and prices for women water collectors.
  - Nestlé, the world's biggest bottler, extracts up to 3.6m liters of water daily from Six Nations treaty land in Canada with no compensation to the Indigenous peoples there,<sup>55</sup> where First Nations women seek to rebuild sacred connection to water.<sup>56</sup>
  - Cost inflation in the Philippines was up to 500-700% the original cost with further privatization,<sup>57</sup> where in the past decades rural women's organizations, called for increased access to water services as a human right.<sup>58</sup>

## Respect, Relationship and Responsibility: Why Women are Critical to Water Crisis Solutions

Due to unequal gender norms, women and gender diverse people are disproportionately impacted by the exacerbating effects of climate change. At the same time, they are crucial leaders in the transition to a just, renewable future. Without adequate participation of the most impacted, governments have often invested in inefficient and harmful mega-projects like dams, canals, aqueducts, pipelines and water reservoirs that are neither

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<sup>51</sup> Brown, K. (2022, March 10). *Women in the Water Sector: Working Together for the Future*. Stormwater Solutions. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>52</sup> Taing, L. & Grace Oluwasanya, G. (2022, March 7). *Gender Blind Spots in the Water Sector*. United Nations University, Institute for Water Environment and Health. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>53</sup> Gender CC Women for Climate Justice. (n.d.). *Water, gender and climate change*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>54</sup> Bienkowski, B. (2013, February 12). *Corporations Grabbing Land and Water Overseas*. Scientific American. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>55</sup> Shimo, A. (2018, October 4). *While Nestlé extracts millions of litres from their land, residents have no drinking water*. The Guardian. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>56</sup> Cave, K. & McKay, S. (2016, December 12). *Water Song: Indigenous Women and Water*. Resilience. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>57</sup> Pavelich, K. (2017). *Water Privatization: A Threat to Human Rights?* *Global Societies Journal*, 5. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>58</sup> Women's Environment & Development Organization. (2003). *Diverting the Flow: A Resource Guide to Gender, Rights and Water Privatization*. [\[LINK\]](#)



environmentally sustainable nor economically viable.<sup>59</sup> However, research has shown that actively involving women in management and decisions in disaster planning and response lead to more successful programs and projects.<sup>60</sup> Despite studies showing that women's participation in decision-making can be hindered by meeting times, working hours, and caretaking responsibilities,<sup>61</sup> water projects were six to seven times more effective where women were involved than when they were not.<sup>62</sup>

There are many widespread successes of women in water leadership and stewardship that the global community can look to. For example, in Nigeria, a social enterprise model for women-run water centers reduced the time spent collecting water for over 6,000 women, and furthermore increased access to clean, affordable water for over 30,000 people, leading to improved economic, health, and educational outcomes across the community.<sup>63</sup>

In Chile, about 43 per cent of the cooperatives that provided drinking water to rural areas are led by women.<sup>64</sup> These cooperatives provided water for nearly two million residents which amounts to 99 percent of households in rural concentrated areas. Additionally, women leadership has been central to the convention rewriting the constitution to advocate for the end of water entitlements. The 155-member convention was the first globally to respect gender parity.<sup>65</sup>

When Maria Mutagamba served as the Ugandan minister of state for water, among her development of five-year gender strategies for the water sector, she included strategies for women to take up key positions on decision-making committees and provide guidance on integrating women's concerns into the water and sanitation sectors.<sup>66</sup> Access to safe water in Uganda increased from 51 percent to 61 percent in only two years.<sup>67</sup>

LaDonna Brave Bull Allard was the tribal historic preservation officer for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, and alerted people to the impending plans for construction of the

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<sup>59</sup> UNEP. (2016). *Half the World to Face Severe Water Stress by 2030 unless Water Use is "Decoupled" from Economic Growth*, Says International Resource Panel. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>60</sup> Agarwal, B. (2009). Does Women's Proportional Strength Affect Their Participation? Governing Local Forests in South Asia. *World Development*, 38(1), 98-112. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>61</sup> UN Water. (n.d.) *Eliminating discrimination and inequalities in access to water and sanitation*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>62</sup> de Albuquerque, C. (2021, March 8). *Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. A Woman's Business*. Sanitation and Water for All. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>63</sup> Connell, A. (2017, March 22). *Water Access is a Gender Equality Issue*. Council on Foreign Relations. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>64</sup> Langrand, M. (n.d.) *Part II: women lead community-run efforts to tackle Chile's water crisis*. Geneva Solutions. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>65</sup> Langrand, M. (n.d.) *Part II: women lead community-run efforts to tackle Chile's water crisis*. Geneva Solutions. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>66</sup> Trivedi, A. (2018, October 18). *Women Are the Secret Weapon for Better Water Management*. World Resources Institute. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>67</sup> Trivedi, A. (2018, October 18). *Women Are the Secret Weapon for Better Water Management*. World Resources Institute. [\[LINK\]](#)

Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>68</sup> In response, the Standing Rock resistance grew to a global movement to call attention to the role fossil fuel reliance plays in increasing climate change and the urgency of protecting the world's water.<sup>69</sup> Referencing commitments as a water protector, she said: "We must not sell our people's blood, land, and water to uphold the dysfunction we live under now. We have no choice but to break the cycle of trauma so our future generations can have a better life. I believe it starts with the water and ends with the water. Water is life."<sup>70</sup>

It is clear that women are key to securing protections for people and water. Whether it's on the frontlines of resistance to fossil fuel pollution of water, collecting and protecting water, addressing sanitation and safety, or advocating for bold and transformative water and climate policies at international forums— women are leading the way!<sup>71</sup>

## **Moving with the Turning Tide: Toward Gender and Water Justice**

The global community must reckon with deeply entrenched structural barriers to women and gender diverse people's participation in water access. Continuing to exclude and de-prioritize the global majority of water collectors and protectors can only result in further harm to water relationships and water systems. We have the opportunity to transform the response to the global water crisis by significantly advancing and centering the leadership, analysis, and frameworks of frontline women leaders and global feminist movements.

We must secure access to clean and safe water as a basic human right for everyone in every country. We must secure protections that extend beyond arbitrary borders. This will require not only changing our detrimental use of water, but also ensuring that no institutions or corporations impede on this life-giving right to water. To this goal, global communities have already made a call toward and implementation of Rights of Nature.<sup>72</sup> The majority of the world's legal frameworks treat nature as property, meaning that life-giving water is seen as an object to be sold and consumed. However, challenges to the idea that ecosystems are property to be exploited endlessly by humans, instead recognize the Earth as a living, rights-bearing entity, and water as a further extension of this

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<sup>68</sup> Chavez, A. & Pember, M. A. (2021, April 12). *LaDonna Brave Bull Allard 'changed history'*. Indian Country Today. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>69</sup> Chavez, A. & Pember, M. A. (2021, April 12). *LaDonna Brave Bull Allard 'changed history'*. Indian Country Today. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>70</sup> Brave Bull Allard, L. (2017, February 4). *How Powerful Could We Be If We Agree to Stand Our Ground on Our Treaty Land*. Yes! Media. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>71</sup> Women's Earth and Climate Action Network. (2022). *Women Speak: Stories, Case Studies, and Solutions from the Frontlines of Climate Change*. [\[LINK\]](#)

<sup>72</sup> Biggs, S., Goldtooth, T. B. K., Orielle Lake, O. (n.d.) *Rights of Nature & Mother Earth: Rights-based Law for Systemic Change*. [\[LINK\]](#)

rights-bearing entity.<sup>73</sup> An emphasis on the importance of Indigenous and grassroots wisdom in guiding the development of these frameworks must be respected to uphold and uplift a way forward away from continual crises. Communities around the world are now engaged in critical struggles to protect their local waters, and it is time that we uphold water as a global commons for all and ensure the leadership of women in this struggle.

## **Calls to Action for Governments and Financial Institutions:**

- Ensure meaningful leadership of women in all their diversity in water access, protection, and management.
- Local communities often know what is best for the particular complexities and care of their region, so decisions must encompass the entirety of a water basin and not be divided and estranged by arbitrary political borders.
- Respect and implement Indigenous rights and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent when Indigenous communities say no to harmful projects that threaten water.
- Divest from extractive industries which continue to pollute water sources, and invest in a Just Transition and life-affirming practices.
- End the commodification, financialization and exploitation of water.
- End market-based mechanisms of water management.
- End the privatization of water and implement a global water commons.
- Based on the Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth legal framework, acknowledge that water has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles.



The report was written and published by the Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN). WECAN is a solutions-based, multi-faceted 501c3 non-profit organization established to engage women worldwide in policy advocacy, on-the-ground projects, trainings, and movement building for global climate justice. WECAN is based in the San Francisco Bay Area, California. For questions, please email [info@wecaninternational.org](mailto:info@wecaninternational.org).

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<sup>73</sup> Women's Earth and Climate Action Network. (2022). Rights of Nature Advocacy. [\[LINK\]](#)