

Empowering women to boost Africa's water security

By [Caroline Mwongera](#)

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For most of us, accessing water means turning on a tap. We pay the bill and the water is always there. It is clear, clean and abundant, so we never have to conserve on hydration, handwashing, cleaning, irrigating crops and watering livestock.



Caroline Mwongera is a farming systems and climate change senior scientist at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT. Source: [OIT School](#)

Yet, for millions of Africans, the question of finding enough water to drink, bathe and grow food looms large at the start of each day. African women in particular confront this issue because the vast majority of them are responsible for water management in the household.

Today, [nearly 90%](#) of homesteads in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa have no access to piped water. As a result, women and girls walk up to [two-and-a-half hours per roundtrip](#) to collect water for basic needs. The time and energy they spend on this task decreases their availability for caring for homestead gardens and selling their produce.

Climate change triggers weather extremes in every region of the continent, worsening the water situation. Floods, droughts, desertification of croplands and rising sea levels are becoming more visible each day. The [Global Climate Index 2021](#) ranks Mozambique, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe among the top 20 countries most affected by extreme weather events between 2000 and 2019.

Global weather changes will continue to threaten the supply of Africa's limited water resources. By the time we reach 2°C above pre-industrial levels, approximately [15% of the global population will experience severe decreases](#) in water access, and the number of people living in absolute water scarcity will increase by 40%. Even now, rising sea levels in Senegal are [displacing communities](#) and forcing many to travel far to find fresh water.

Women manage water — from households to the fields

Beyond concerns of daily human safety and security at the household level, the water crisis affects agricultural production.

In Senegal, for instance, women play an integral role in water management because of their traditional responsibilities of water collection, cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. At the same time, they constitute nearly 70% of the rural workforce and generate slightly more than 80% of its agricultural products.

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Patriarchy places women at a disadvantage by systematically limiting their access to information, technology, decision-making and land ownership. Long-standing social restrictions and discriminatory practices preclude most women from making water-use decisions. This is particularly the case in community water associations, including producer organisations, where less than 30% of women farmers have a governing role. In addition, only 20% of Senegalese women have access to financial services, such as loans and insurance.

Disempowering women is wrong, economically and morally. Our Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT's [recent](#)

[research](#) in Senegal demonstrates that women can and do play a leading role in creating household water security, increasing agricultural output and improving family health.

Access to wells and piped water reduces the burden on women and time spent by them on low-tech water collection methods. As a result, it gives them more time to focus on other activities, such as vegetable cultivation. In so doing, they produce larger and higher-quality crop yields to sell, and family members consume more vegetables and drink clean water. Overall, women's rise in incomes depends more on the water system than men's (35% vs 33%).



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Empowered women and communities yield better results

Irrigated agriculture is the norm in developed economies and is comparatively widespread in other regions. About 14% of cultivated land in Latin America and 37% in Asia are irrigated. In Africa, the figure stands at just 6%. Irrigation systems, therefore, represent an opportunity for stimulating sustainable and inclusive economic growth and empowering women to improve their household economies.

[Multiple-use water services](#) (MUS) is an innovative approach by local government bodies and non-profit organisations that places villagers in charge of the design and governance of their water infrastructure for various needs of the community — from drinking to washing and from irrigation and to livestock use. This infrastructure includes collection tanks, pipes, taps, secure access points for people and livestock and more.

Since its introduction in 2004, MUS has seen success across [Africa](#) in increased crop production and household income, better access to diverse foods, decreased disease transmission, and empowered women and communities. Communities are also involved in the maintenance of the water infrastructure.

[In Tanzania](#), poor women earn half or more of their household's total income through gardening and other productive activities, based around multiple-use water systems.

Similarly, [in Ethiopia](#), the extra milk from dairy animals and time saved (4-6 hours), because of improved access to water, enables women to organise into collective groups to sell their milk in larger markets. [In Senegal](#), women also derive a greater share of their personal income from the piped water source than men (19% vs 15%).

Do the right thing

Women comprise 50% of Africa's workforce. Why, then, are we battling our biggest existential threat — water scarcity — with one hand tied behind our backs?

When women are co-designers of irrigation technologies and equal partners in implementing solutions, the location, purpose and scale of projects are optimised to women's rights and needs, benefiting everyone.

Increased frequency and severity of heat waves, rain and drought will continue to constrain Africa's water resources. Competition for water among user groups, such as farmers and pastoralists, or between communities in upper and lower zones, could lead to social instability or even civil conflict. With women contributing to solutions, we could avert these undesirable outcomes and achieve water security.

I call on Africa's national and local governments to do the right thing. Let us allocate the funding and rally the political will to empower women in the battle to improve and sustain Africa's water supply.

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