

**WOMN + WATER IN AFRICA:**

# **AN OVERVIEW OF WATER JUSTICE STRUGGLES**

**URGENT  
ACTION  
FUND +  
AFRICA**

FOR WOMN'S HUMAN RIGHTS



The work of UAF-Africa is aligned with feminist and alternative approaches to water control and management, which focus on the needs of the most marginalised in society – African women from poor communities – and this is at the heart of this research. This report emphasises the urgency of women's struggle for water and highlights how water is an intersectional issue that cuts across food production, health, housing, sanitation and climate change. The report puts a spotlight on the importance of strengthening social movements and connecting struggles at local, regional and international levels. Some of the key aspects of this include feminist political education at grassroots level, strategic convenings to enhance solidarity, influencing and building powerful counter-narratives through a continental water justice campaign.

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UAF-Africa celebrates the multi-disciplinary and transformative work of her grantee partners who shared their experiences of courage and resistance in the face of grave threat. Their passion, unshakable commitment, and clarity of political vision inspires us at UAF-Africa to resource mobilise for big, strategic, flexible, long term and core support that ensure feminist activists, organisations, and movements feel supported.

This report contents' responsibility lies solely with UAF-Africa and the authors.

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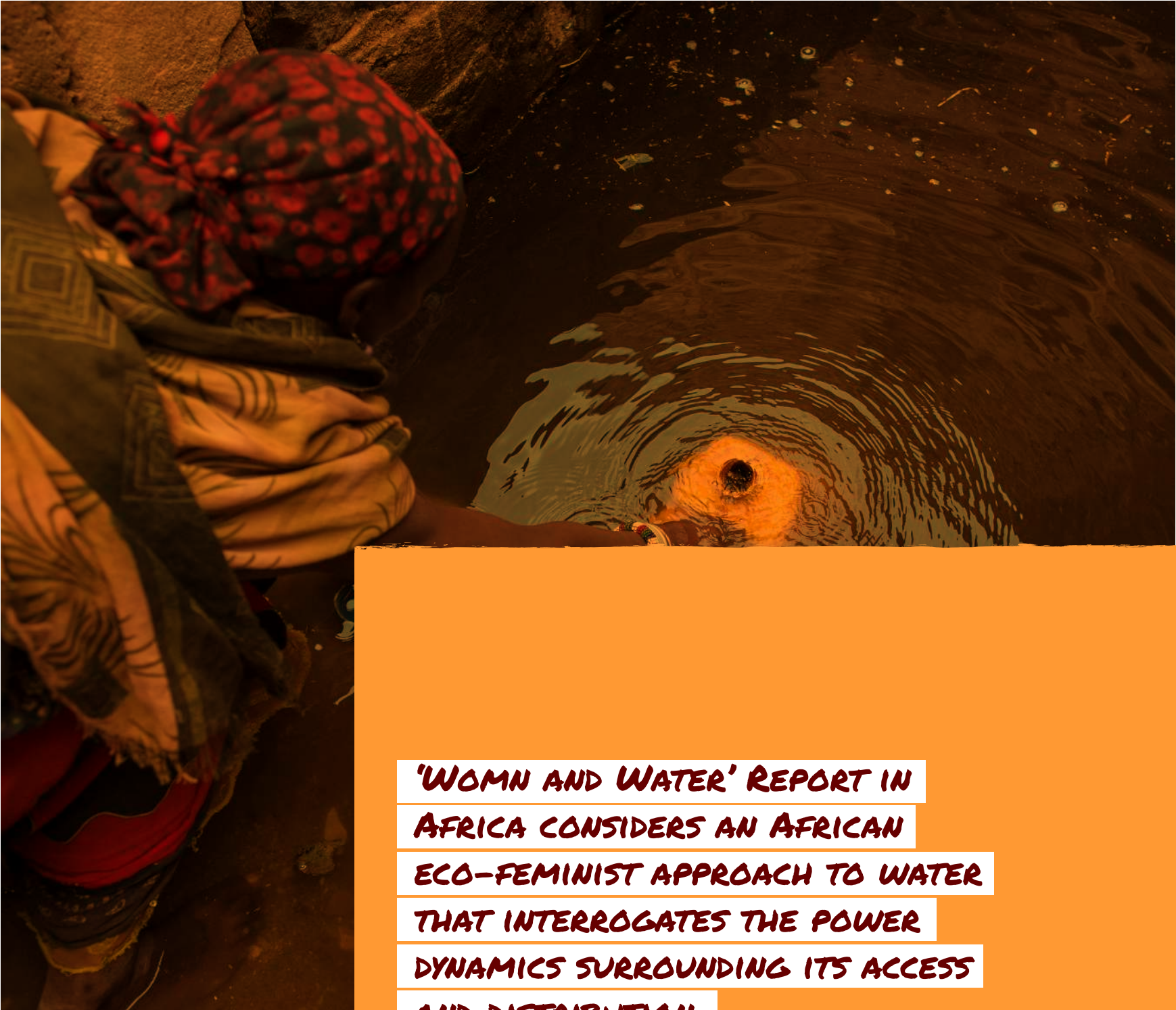
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**'WOMN AND WATER' REPORT IN  
AFRICA CONSIDERS AN AFRICAN  
ECO-FEMINIST APPROACH TO WATER  
THAT INTERROGATES THE POWER  
DYNAMICS SURROUNDING ITS ACCESS  
AND DISTRIBUTION.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Access to clean water is a basic human right but one that is denied to millions of poor communities across Africa. This research commissioned by the Urgent Action Fund-Africa (UAF-Africa) underlines how it is womn who bear the brunt of lack of water and how this has an impact on their health and livelihoods as well as that of their families and wider community. The report calls for a water justice campaign that focuses on strengthening grassroots organising and feminist movement-building across Africa.**

The report entitled, 'Womn and Water in Africa: An Overview of Water Justice Struggles', examines the creeping privatisation of water services on the continent and how womn activists are resisting it. UAF-Africa seeks to strengthen organising for an Africa-wide campaign for water justice and connect African womn in frontline water justice formations culminating in the gathering of grassroots groups at the People's Alternative World Water Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2022.

Two case studies in particular, from Ghana and South Africa, provide an insight into what ground have been gained by activists and what more needs to be done.

Based on a desktop review of literature and online interviews, the report opens with a discussion of the competing narratives around what causes water insecurity and the solutions to it before embarking on an examination of the dominant neoliberal framework.

Neoliberalism views the water crisis as a technical issue caused by population increase, climate change and ineffective government, one that can be resolved by handing over the management of water services to the private sector. Such an approach sees the United Nations

(UN), which in 2010 famously passed a resolution recognising the human right to water, become seemingly unlikely bedfellows of free market cheerleaders like the World Bank.

Far from addressing the challenges posed by lack of water, turning it into a commodity creates more hardship for womn in marginalised communities. This has prompted the rise of a number of anti-capitalist and feminist organisations that demand democratised systems of water control and access that are motivated by public service rather than profit.

Their work has become all the more urgent following the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, which have thrown the water crisis into sharp focus, says the report. Lockdown restrictions imposed via the full force of the law meant that womn could no longer go to their farms or sell goods on the street, and they did not have enough water to wash their hands, seen as a crucial measure to curb the spread of the virus, let alone to water their crops or livestock.

Unable to pursue their livelihoods and stuck at home inevitably created tensions, leaving womn vulnerable to domestic abuse, while they risked sexual assault as they walked long distances in search of water.

The report emphasise that lockdowns have only served to exacerbate existing inequalities prevailing in womn's lives, particularly in the realms of health, housing, sanitation and gender-based violence, all intersecting with water scarcity thanks to "unresolved social dynamics of colonialism based on racial capitalism and sexism, which continue to create the dismal statistics for womn and girls".

'Womn and Water in Africa' considers an African eco-feminist approach to water that interrogates the power dynamics surrounding its access and distribution.

It also highlights the way neoliberal entities have muddied the waters by hijacking the language of the left, talking about "water for all", "sustainability" and "conservation" while bringing water into a market place rigged against the poor. It is part of a new gold rush, with water being referred to as 'Blue Gold' and water 'futures' making their first foray onto the world's stock exchanges.

The assumption has been that with governments only too happy to get into bed with privateers, there is no stopping the wave of corporate take-overs of water services on the continent. This is far from the case and campaigns around water that have been gaining momentum since the early 2000s. Cape Town, South Africa, has been a particular flashpoint for mobilisations against the installation of costly water metres that limit the amount of water received in a day, spearheaded by the African Water Commons Collective, a coalition of water justice activists. Using a variety of community-based campaigning tactics in which "everyone is an organiser", it works with mainly womn in a city that almost ran dry in 2018 and where water activists have faced a fierce backlash.

In Ghana, the struggle to take water services back into public control saw three successful campaigns to prevent the government permanently introducing

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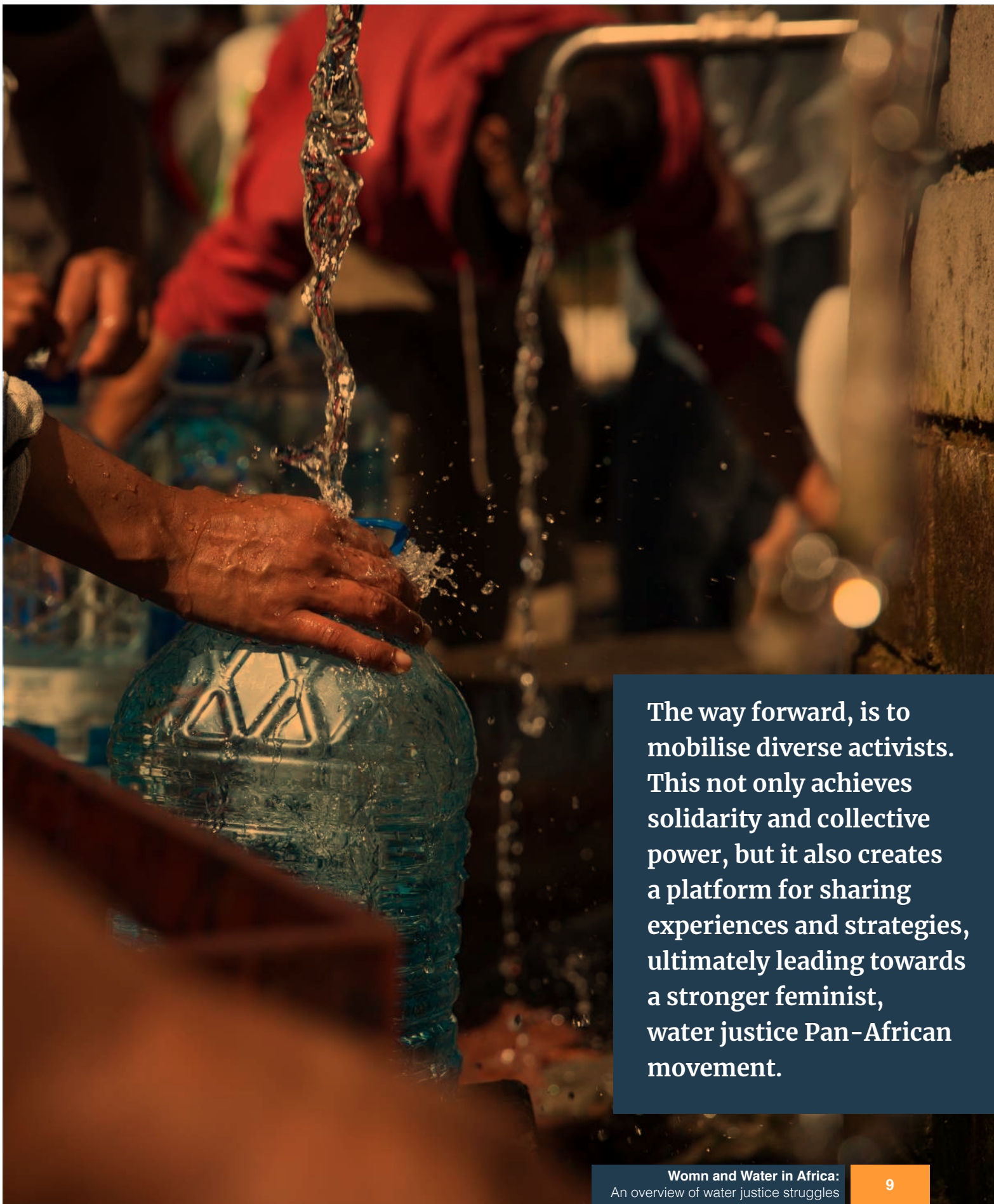
pre-paid water metres via private contractors. The Water Citizens Network and other civil society groups waged an intense media campaign to put the authorities on the spot, pointing out how the system was expensive and led to cut-offs and outbreaks of cholera and dysentery. Pre-paid metres were eventually abandoned in 2016 in favour of payment scratch cards, showing that while the battle was won the war continues in the campaign for a municipally run service that takes into the account the daily needs of womn to provide water in the home.

The report goes on to note that many activist organisations in Africa do not have a strong gender focus, or campaigns around a number of vexed issues aside from water, like food, land and housing. The way forward,

according to UAF-Africa, is to bring activists together from various organisations. This not only achieves strength in numbers, but it also creates the platform for sharing strategies and knowledge, ultimately leading towards feminist, Pan-African movement-building. Among the groups examined in this regard is the eco-feminist, Johannesburg-based WoMin, which partners with organisations in 13 African countries, particularly those fighting against environmental damage caused by extractive industries and dam construction.

While the report lays to rest the myth of the passive citizen and omnipotent corporation, with foreign investors and governments impatient to open up Africa's water market, it stresses the urgent need for a continent-wide network of water justice groups as well as more collaborative and deeper research. To this end, UAF-Africa commits to work towards strengthening grassroots organising and feminist movement-building in the run-up to the 2022 People's Alternative World Water Forum, which is being held in Africa South of the Sahara for the first time.





The way forward, is to mobilise diverse activists. This not only achieves solidarity and collective power, but it also creates a platform for sharing experiences and strategies, ultimately leading towards a stronger feminist, water justice Pan-African movement.

# INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the urgency of Africa's water justice struggles, particularly the lived realities of marginalised African women. Hand washing is one of the most important and effective protective measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19.



*IN AFRICA SOUTH OF THE SAHARA, MORE THAN 40 PER CENT OF THE POPULATION DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER. WOMEN BEAR THE BRUNT OF THIS PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS DUE TO EXISTING RACE, CLASS AND GENDER INEQUITIES. WATER REALITIES SHAPE AFRICAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF WORK, LIVELIHOODS AND HOME.*



**THE CURRENT GLOBAL HEALTH, HUNGER, AND  
CLIMATE CRISES REQUIRE US TO TREAT WATER  
AS A POLITICAL AND FEMINIST ISSUE THAT  
NECESSITATES A POLITICAL SOLUTION DRIVEN BY  
STRONG GRASSROOTS SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the urgency of Africa's water justice struggles, particularly the lived realities of marginalised African womn. Hand washing is one of the most important and effective protective measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Washing one's hands is only possible when water is available . In Africa South of the Sahara, more than 40 per cent of the population do not have access to clean water. Womn bear the brunt of this public health crisis due to existing race, class and gender inequities . Water realities shape African womn's experiences of work, livelihoods and home.

Water issues intersect with community issues around basic services provision, housing, land, food, health, labour and gender-based violence. Water is at the heart of both the climate crisis, the hunger crisis, and the crisis of armed conflict on the continent. This report argues that the current global health, hunger, and climate crises require us to treat water as a political and feminist issue that necessitates a political solution driven by strong grassroots social justice movements.

This desktop research is aimed at conducting a feminist analysis of the work carried out by various organisations on womn and water

in Africa. The overall purpose of the desktop study is to inform a year-long water justice campaign for African womn. There is a consensus among various actors involved in water issues in Africa that African womn from marginalised communities are affected the most by lack of water. However, there are competing views on what the root causes of water problems are and how they should be addressed.

On the one hand, there is the dominant neoliberal view promoted by mainstream economists, international financial institutions such as the World Bank, inter-governmental institutions such as the United Nations and international donor agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These view the water crisis as a technical issue caused by increase in population size, climate change and lack of national governments' ability to manage and distribute water effectively.

The solutions proposed by neoliberals is to give the role of controlling and managing water to multinational companies. By this process, water is converted into a commodity that has to be exchanged in the market.

Drawing on examples of water struggles in countries such as Ghana and South Africa, the research found that a neoliberal approach does not address the challenges of lack of water that African womn in marginalised communities face.

Instead womn's livelihoods are compromised, they experience violence from men in their attempts to search for water, and their health is negatively affected and so is that of their children.

On the other hand, a radical and alternative view to the neoliberal model has been developed by feminists and eco-feminist organisations such as the African Ecofeminist Collective, Pan-African movements such as Africans Rising, social movements like the Anti-Privatisation Forum and Rural Women's Assembly, progressive academics and non-governmental organisations, among them WoMin and Earth Life.

These call for democratised systems of water control and access, especially by African womn, which are embedded in social relations and womn's own practices and requirements. Such radicals reject the privatisation of water and its control by multinational companies whose primary focus is to generate profit.



The work of UAF-Africa is aligned with feminist and alternative approaches to water control and management, which focus on the needs of the most marginalised in society – African women from poor communities – and this is at the heart of this research. The report emphasises the urgency of women's struggle for water and highlights

how water is an intersectional issue that cuts across food production, health, housing, sanitation and climate change.

As a result of the global nature of the water crisis and solutions, the report puts a spotlight on the importance of strengthening social movements and connecting the

struggles at local, regional and international levels. Some of the key aspects of this include feminist political education at grassroots level and strategic convenings to enhance solidarity and build powerful counter-narratives through a continental water justice campaign.

### **THE REPORT SEEKS TO ANSWER THE FOLLOWING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

- What is water justice and why is it a feminist issue?
- What theoretical frameworks are used in water justice discourse?
- Which organisations are working on this issue in Africa? What is their scope, approach and footprint?
- What water justice issues are African women grappling with in Africa?
- What has been the impact of Covid-19 on African women?
- What are the alternative solutions and actions that different organisations are developing and promoting towards water justice for African Women?

The following chapter provides an explanation of the research process and methods of this study. It then proceeds to sketch the water realities of African women in the context of Covid-19 and related lockdowns. After this, is the conceptual and theoretical considerations related to water justice before going on to discuss radical and eco-feminist approaches.

In addition, the report presents three case studies that illustrate in more detail what water justice campaigns and organising looks like on the continent. We found it relevant to present examples from different places, urban and rural, and discuss their significance regarding the water justice struggles of African women. The final chapter presents an overview of organisations on the continent working on women and water. This gives a glimpse of the wide variety of approaches and activities that exist in this field. In the conclusion, we made specific recommendations for water justice campaign that aims to address the need for a feminist movement-building approach for water justice and wider social justice in Africa.

# RESEARCH

# METHODS

The data presented in this report was collected through a desktop review of literature and other sources of information, including academic papers related to water justice, gender and feminism, annual reports of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social movements, international donor agencies and inter-governmental institutions, government and private sector partnership initiatives.

A team of three researchers with extensive experience of social justice struggles in South Africa worked on the report. Their existing relationships with activists and civil society organisations provided access to relevant sources of information, including people to interview and connect with in preparation for the UAF-Africa water justice campaign. The research and writing were carried out between February and March 2021.

While the terms of reference stated that this was a desktop review study, the researchers complemented it with primary data, which was collected via email and Zoom interviews. The reason for conducting interviews this way was because researchers found the desktop review to be limited in getting information about grassroots organisations or social movements whose work was not available online.

For this reason, the researchers reached out to individuals working on water justice and related issues in their networks and managed to conduct eight interviews with activists involved in regional and international water justice work. Due to time constraints, primary data collection was limited, but we believe it provided relevant and crucial insights into water justice struggles

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WATER REALITIES FOR AFRICAN WOMN

Water justice is  
an intersectional  
issue, meaning  
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Water justice is an intersectional issue, meaning water struggles are connected with struggles around land, food production and livelihoods. During the pandemic, countries have imposed lockdowns that affected womn's lives, livelihoods and water realities in specific ways. It is important to distinguish between the impact of Covid-19 the disease and the state's restrictions on mobility and economic activity.

In countries like South Africa and Zimbabwe, the first Covid-19 deaths were due to state repression when vulnerable people experienced increased abuse and violence by law enforcement agencies. Womn in particular were harassed and threatened by police and military when trying to secure basic daily needs, including water .

The violent reality of the lack of water directly affects African womn and their communities. Climate change and extreme weather conditions like floods and droughts create problems for womn. Their efforts to create healthy and safe societies are constantly undermined by poor living conditions and repressive authorities whose chief concern is to protect business interests.

For womn, the lack of access to water means activities such as cooking, cleaning and growing food, both in the domestic sphere and in the realm of production, take more time and effort. In water-scarce environments, womn have to choose how best to use the water that is available, which during Covid-19 meant that trade-offs were likely made between using water for hand washing or for irrigation. The impact of Covid-19 on African womn's water realities can be understood through four aspects of womn's lives and livelihoods: small-scale farming, the informal economy, health and gender-based violence.



# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SMALL-SCALE FARMING

The majority of women in rural Africa are engaged in subsistence farming. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, African women account for 73 percent of those economically active in agriculture and produce more than 80 percent of the food crops. Rural women are the guardians of household food security as food producers, fuelwood and water collectors.

Therefore, it is important to understand how women accessed and used (more) water during the pandemic and whether trade-offs were made between, for example, using water for irrigation or hand washing, especially in water-scarce areas. Was water use redirected and what did women prioritise?

We found that women's economic activities were affected by restrictions and policing of movement. Covid-19 lockdown regulations in South Africa restricted movement of people and stipulated that everyone except for essential workers should stay at home.

While food production is an essential service, only large commercial farmers – predominantly white men – were regarded as essential and they had easy access to permits, which enabled them to move around freely and continue with their agricultural activities. Subsistence and small-scale farmers – predominantly African women – did not enjoy the same privileges. Instead, they were restricted from going to their fields and interrogated by heavily armed police. As a result, some lost their livestock, particularly goats, as they were unable to walk the animals for grazing.

Instead, they had to keep them in kraals with no animal feed and water. In addition, many women lost their produce because they were unable to harvest on time, especially when lockdown coincided with the harvest season. Women who went on lockdown during the planting season missed the opportunity to plant crops, which means they will have nothing to harvest in the next season.

**In some countries only large commercial farmers – predominantly white men – were regarded as essential and they had easy access to permits (during lock down), which enabled them to move around freely and continue with their agricultural activities. Subsistence and small-scale farmers – predominantly African women – did not enjoy the same privileges.**



WoMin: <https://womin.africa/press-release-c19-womens-solidarity/>

<http://www.fao.org/3/i5251e/i5251e.pdf>

<https://www.wri.org/blog/2020/09/rural-women-must-be-heart-covid-19-response-and-recovery> Interview with Carol Werunga, Urgent Action Fund-Africa.

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

**IN GHANA, WIEGO SURVEYED 193 STREET VENDORS, MARKET TRADERS AND WASTE PICKERS AND FOUND THAT DUE TO COVID-19 LOCKDOWN REGULATIONS EARNINGS WERE REDUCED. EVEN THOUGH INFORMAL WORKERS WERE BACK ON THE STREETS, MANY OF THEM REPORTED THAT THEY HAD NOT RECOVERED WHAT THEY LOST DURING THE LOCKDOWN.**

The study conducted by Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising (WIEGO) on the impact

of Covid-19 on women in the informal economy highlights that women lost their livelihoods at a huge scale. As a result, the demand for water at home and pressure on women to access water increased significantly. Loss of jobs and trades also led to an increase in unpaid household responsibilities for women such as cleaning, cooking and childcare.

In Ghana, WIEGO surveyed 193 street vendors, market traders and waste pickers and found that due to Covid-19 lockdown regulations earnings were reduced. Even though informal workers were back on the streets, many of them reported that they had not recovered what they lost during the lockdown. As earnings have decreased, household stress has increased: 62 percent of respondents reported an increase in cleaning, 49 percent reported an increase in cooking and 52

percent of respondents with children reported an increase in childcare during the crisis period. Water is central to all of these three activities and responsibilities, and this has placed more pressure on women to ensure there is enough water in households each day.

In Tanzania, WIEGO found that due to the absence of an official or generalised lockdown, 84 percent of domestic workers in Dar es Salaam were able to continue working during April 2020. However, 12 percent of domestic workers reported incidents of hunger in their households. In order to offset the impact of the pandemic, 54 percent of all domestic workers resorted to strategies such as borrowing money and seeking help from friends or neighbours. Similar experiences of women in the informal economy were observed in Senegal.

South Africa was hit hardest by the pandemic, with the highest rates of infections on the continent. The response by the government to put

the country on a hard lockdown meant many women who were engaged in informal economic activities lost their livelihoods. Such activities included selling cooked food in the market, at the bus or train stations, selling fresh vegetables and meat on the streets and looking after children at day care centres, all of which came to a standstill during hard lockdown. WIEGO found that 97 percent of street vendors, 95 percent of market traders and 74 percent of waste pickers ceased working in April 2020, during the heaviest restrictions. By July, none of the occupational groups surveyed had returned to pre-lockdown average levels of daily income, with 72 percent of workers reporting a drop in household income. The research further established that during the lockdown, workers across occupational groups reported increases in unpaid household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning and child care. Again, there was more pressure on women to ensure there was enough water required to perform these responsibilities.

<https://www.wiego.org/COVID-19-Crisis-and-the-Informal-Economy-Study>

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HEALTH

**" I'M MARRELL NOVEMBER AND I'M UPSET THAT I HAVE TO BE WITHOUT WATER EVERY DAY. IT [THE WATER METER] GOES ON IN THE MORNING AND THEN IT SWITCHES OFF AGAIN. I'M A PENSIONER AND I AM ON MEDICATION, HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO TAKE MY MEDICATION IF I DON'T HAVE WATER? ...AT NIGHT I HAVE TO SCRATCH ICE OUT OF THE FREEZER SO I CAN TAKE MY TABLETS BECAUSE THERE IS NO WATER TO DRINK IT WITH**

~ Marrell November, African Water Commons Collective, Mitchells Plain, Cape Town, South Africa. [Shared with permission]

Womn's health is closely tied to the availability and quality of water. When it comes to menstruation and other sexual and reproductive rights, it is crucial for girls and womn to have consistent and reliable access to clean water. Contaminated water is a vector for waterborne diseases, which in combination with Covid-19 potentially contribute to co-morbidity. To prevent transmission of Covid-19, it is important to practice frequent hand washing. As the number of people staying at home during the pandemic has increased, it has been a challenge to ensure sufficient amounts of water are allocated for handwashing.

Communities in mining areas already carry heavy disease burdens (for example, respiratory illnesses due to air pollution), and suffer a longstanding lack of

access to water and sanitation due to mining operations' capture of water sources . As a result, mining areas became hotspots for Covid-19, exposing womn to the disease and increasing care burdens immensely.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported its concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on womn and girls in Africa, fearing that their vulnerabilities would worsen as the pandemic overwhelms the health system. WHO regional director for Africa stated that "we are already seeing that the impact of Covid-19 on women and girls is profound. Women are disproportionately affected by lockdown and this is resulting in a reduced access to health services". Due to the focus on curbing the spread of Covid-19, essential services such as access to sexual and reproductive health

services were disrupted and neglected.

According to WHO, in Zimbabwe the number of caesarean sections performed decreased by 42 percent between January and April 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. The number of live births in health facilities fell by 21 percent, while new clients on combined birth control pills dropped by 90 percent. In Burundi, statistics show that births with skilled attendants fell from 30,826 in April 2019 to 4,749 in April 2020.

These changes have a direct impact on womn's physical and mental health, creating more stress for them as they are still expected to perform household duties such as cleaning, fetching water and taking care of children. A quote below captures some of these difficulties quite strongly:

MacDonald et al. 2020. Public Water and Covid-19: Dark Clouds and Silver Linings, p 5 <https://www.newframe.com/mining-communities-bear-the-burden-of-disease/>  
<https://www.afro.who.int/news/who-concerned-over-covid-19-impact-women-girls-africa>



# IMPACT OF COVID-19

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



There is a close link between lack of reliable access to water and gender-based violence. In most cases, women have to walk long distances in search of water and are at risk of men sexually harassing and raping them along the way. There are also many cases of abandoned babies in conflict zones in Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) as a result of young girls exchanging sex for bottles of water and falling pregnant. In Somalia, girls are vulnerable to the practice of early childhood marriage, which is on the rise again because families lack food and water. Women are positioned on the frontlines of these struggles that affect their

lives and livelihoods. When water is turned into a commodity and only available to those who can afford it, a serious undermining of women's collective social life and the power of community to develop alternative social safety networks occurs. We see this in the disappearance of community kitchens and gardens across the continent in areas where water is managed on a restricted individual household level.

A study conducted by UN Women found that reports of violence against women, particularly domestic violence, have increased in several countries due to security, health and financial worries creating tensions, aggravated by

the cramped and confined living conditions of lockdown. Many women were stuck at home with their abusers, while being cut off from their capacity to earn a living. Such violence can still be linked to water because the pressure on women to perform household chores increased during lockdowns.

This chapter has sketched a picture of women's water realities during the Covid-19 pandemic and government-imposed lockdowns. In most instances, these realities already existed and have been exacerbated by the public health crisis and responses to it.

Interview with Carol Werunga, UAF-Africa, 19 February 2021

Interview with Meera Karunanathan, 22 February 2021

<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/womens-empowerment/gender-based-violence-and-covid-19.html>

Vandana, Shiva. 2001. *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution and Profit*. Pluto Press, London

Margreet Zwartveen and Rutgerd Boelens. 2014. 'Defining, researching and struggling for water justice: some conceptual building blocks for research and action', *Water International*, 39:2, 143-158





**There is a close link between lack of reliable access to water and gender-based violence. In most cases, women have to walk long distances in search of water and are at risk of men sexually harassing and raping them along the way.**



# RADICAL METHODS ON WATER JUSTICE

**" FEMINIST REFLECTIONS ABOUT TENURE INSECURITY AND SOCIAL INEQUITIES IN RELATION TO WATER CLASH WITH THE TERMS OF A NEO-LIBERAL FRAMEWORK THAT INVISIBILIZES, NATURALIZES AND OBJECTIFIES THE POLITICS AND POWERS INVOLVED IN WATER RE-ALLOCATION. A FEMINIST RESPONSE CALLS FOR CHALLENGING THE INDIVIDUALIZATION, MARKETIZATION AND CONSUMER/CLIENT FOCUS OF THE NEO-LIBERAL PARADIGM**

Ahlers and Zwartveen, 2009

Water justice is concerned with questions of control, distribution, access and management of water and is embedded and specific to historical and socio-cultural contexts. With globalisation and the intensification of neoliberal policies in the management of natural resources, coupled with the climate crisis worldwide, the control of and access to water as a natural and social resource are highly contested.

Neoliberal ideas that are largely promoted by international financial agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary

Fund (IMF) through Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), have influenced government policies pertaining to the regulation and management of water in Africa and beyond. This has resulted in powerful interests in society such as multinational companies championing the commodification and privatisation of water, and cities being run on a cost-recovery basis.

Water privatisation has been devastating for poor African communities, with women carrying the greatest burden of limited access to clean water. Different

actors in society have responded to the human-made water crisis in various ways, influenced by their understanding of the root causes of the problem and how it should be addressed.

Inter-governmental institutions such as the UN, which is quite influential in the policy advisory work of many governments in Africa and elsewhere, is greatly concerned with access to water through improved service delivery mechanisms. The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) initiative of the UN, under its Sustainable Development Goals





(SDG) partnerships, emphasises the provision of education on basic sanitation and hygiene to marginalised communities, with a particular focus on women and young girls. The UN sees this as a necessary complement to the success of water and sanitation infrastructure projects. The UN's underlying assumption is that women and girls in marginalised communities lack knowledge about hygiene and sanitation, therefore giving this kind of education is a step in the right direction. The challenge with this view is that it does not address power relations that are central to the

ownership, control, management and distribution of water, and does not explain why some people have reliable and constant access to clean water while others do not.

The dominant framing around water scarcity and water security promoted by governments and institutions such as the World Bank explains it as the result of climate change, population growth and processes of urbanisation. It is predicted that by 2050, 1.6 billion Africans will live in cities and urban slums. The premise is that African governments do not have the capacity to deliver water services

to so many people concentrated in urban areas and need help from the private sector to provide people with amenities such as clean drinking water and toilet facilities.

For the dominant explanation about water scarcity, the solution is technical: fixing service delivery, infrastructure and water policies to ensure that everyone has access to their human right to water and sanitation. Neoliberal thinking assumes that the creation of markets for water services and partnerships with private investors are the best model to fix

water problems. These neoliberal views and narratives have been contested by feminist groups, grassroots activists, international networks of social movements, progressive academics and NGOs.

Water justice activists across the globe have challenged the neoliberal framing of water control and distribution, arguing for a democratic control of and access to water that is premised on water as a human right rather than a commodity in the hands of a few private corporations working closely with powerful elites in government. For water justice activists, the control and management of water should be driven by local practices and the needs of ordinary people, and must be approached with a gendered lens. The period around the early 2000s saw communities across the world resisting the privatisation of water. In South Africa, for instance, the Anti-Privatisation Forum was engaged with global networks, taking

leadership and coordinating efforts to dismantle the power of the dominant players

in the control and management of water. During the same period, the Blue Planet Project, based in Canada, was greatly involved in building a global campaign around water and sanitation to be recognised as human rights. Those involved initially were collaborating with other international and local organisations working around the World Water Forum. UN agencies and corporations were leading the discourse on water at the World Water Forum, and the water justice movement grew into a global network and emerged regionally to challenge the dominant narratives. In Africa, a network came together at the World Social Forum in Nairobi in 2007, but due to lack of resources and the wave of backlash against anti-privatisation movements, it has been harder to grow and strengthen it.

There is need for a critical and feminist understanding of current

water politics in Africa. The everyday experiences of urban slum dwellers, subsistence farmers, fisherwomen, and people from mining communities and rural areas broadly prove that the neoliberal approach does not work. On the contrary, their lived realities are about dispossession, violence and power battles as a result of water privatisation and neoliberal governance of water. African communities are up against investors in urban developments, large-scale agriculture and extractive companies, which seek to generate profits out of water – aptly now known as ‘Blue Gold’. As a result, communities are directly affected by the lack of service delivery, the pollution of rivers and the increased cost and control of water use through water meters and water ‘management’ devices. Therefore, a more sustainable solution to man-made water scarcity is to challenge the undercurrent of neoliberal power dynamics.

**IT IS PREDICTED THAT BY 2050, 1.6 BILLION AFRICANS WILL LIVE IN CITIES AND URBAN SLUMS. THE PREMISE IS THAT AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS DO NOT HAVE THE CAPACITY TO DELIVER WATER SERVICES TO SO MANY PEOPLE CONCENTRATED IN URBAN AREAS AND NEED HELP FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR TO PROVIDE PEOPLE WITH AMENITIES SUCH AS CLEAN DRINKING WATER AND TOILET FACILITIES. WATER JUSTICE ACTIVISTS ACROSS THE GLOBE HAVE CHALLENGED THIS NEOLIBERAL FRAMING OF WATER CONTROL AND DISTRIBUTION.**

# RADICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WATER JUSTICE

**WATER IS AN INTERSECTIONAL AND A FEMINIST ISSUE AND SO IS WATER JUSTICE. ACROSS AFRICA, STRUGGLES FOR WATER ARE AT THE HEART OF CIVIL STRIFE AND STRESS WITHIN HOUSEHOLDS. THESE WATER-RELATED ISSUES WOMN FACE ACROSS THE WORLD ARE EXACERBATED BY NEOLIBERAL WATER POLICIES, WHILE RADICAL FEMINISTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS CONTINUE TO CHALLENGE THEM.**

Water is an intersectional and a feminist issue and so is water justice. Water struggles are connected with issues of service delivery – provision of electricity and decent housing – as well as being linked to land, agriculture, food and health. Universal experience shows that water and water struggles predominantly affect womn, who are responsible for care work in the family and in the community, who cook, clean, grow food and take care of children and the sick . Not having access to water disrupts womn's activities and roles at home as well as at work and increases their time burden to negotiate access to water. In an interview with Meera Karunanathan of Blue Planet Project, she stated that during a popular education workshop in Jakarta they asked the group of womn participants what was the key issue they should focus on in their organising and solidarity work. The womn said "access to water".

Likewise in India, there was an exodus of womn extension workers from one of the largest womn's rights organisations over the power dynamics in choosing approaches to improving womn's lives, which revolved around the role of water as key to understanding and challenging structural violence . Across Africa, struggles for water are at the heart of civil strife and stress within households.

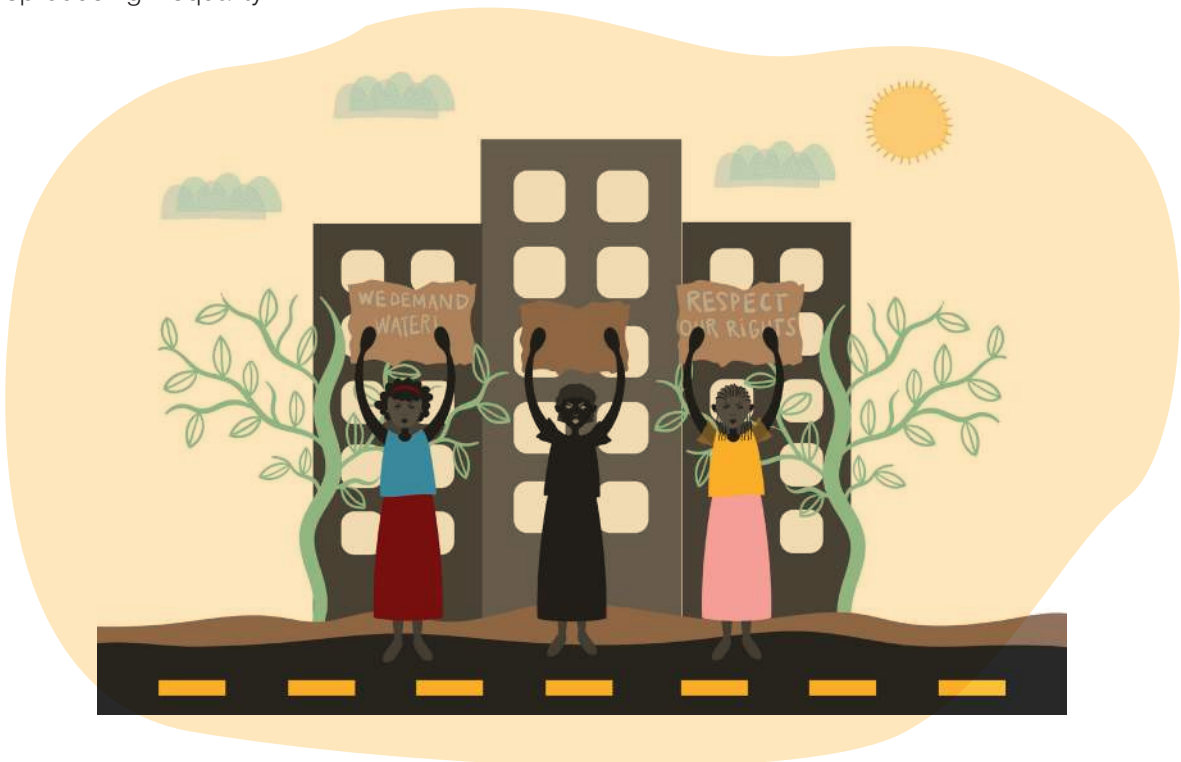
Womn will tell you they cannot run a feeding scheme, a reproductive health workshop or organise a funeral without first solving the daily challenge of accessing water. These water-related issues womn face across the world are exacerbated by neoliberal water policies, while radical feminists and social movements continue to challenge them.

# AN AFRICAN ECO-FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH TO WATER JUSTICE

SDGs six requires the commitment of governments to achieve access to clean, safe affordable drinking water and adequate sanitation and hygiene by 2030 for all . In the lead-up to a high level political forum in 2018, which took stock of progress made thus far, data from WHO and the UN's Children's Fund, UNICEF, showed that this goal is unlikely to be achieved by 2030. Indeed, at the current rate at which nations are working, it would take centuries.

Under neoliberalism we have cities that need to be run on a cost recovery basis: this is the World Bank policy that has informed all post-colonial African government policies. The idea is that if water is free it will not be valued. Many countries on the continent are signatories to the UN Human Right To Water resolution. In South Africa, for example, the constitution supports the right to water, and water resources were nationalised in 1998 under the National Water Act, a law the government has failed to properly implement.

Like all countries on the continent, South Africa is committed to cities being run on a cost recovery model, with no acknowledgment of unresolved social dynamics of colonialism based on racial capitalism and sexism, which continue to create the dismal statistics for womn and girls across all sectors. In short, we entered 2021 as if individual human rights and corporate rights are on a level playing field and that basic services need not be cross-subsidised or socialised. A radical feminist perspective on political economy and political ecology posits that this is a recipe for maintaining and reproducing inequality.





# AN AFRICAN ECO-FEMINIST APPROACH TO WATER

**"POLITICAL ECOLOGY AT A BASIC LEVEL CONCERNS ITSELF WITH ISSUES OF POWER OVER NATURAL OR ECOLOGICAL RESOURCES. AS A FEMINIST POLITICAL ECOLOGIST, I'M DEEPLY CONCERNED WITH THE GENDERED DIMENSIONS AND STRUGGLES OVER ACCESS AND CONTROL OVER THESE RESOURCES, THE NEOLIBERALISATION OF NATURE AND THE WAYS IN WHICH WOMN ON THE FRONTLINES OF THESE STRUGGLES ARE ARTICULATING THEIR CONCERNS, CHALLENGING THE CONTINUED ENCLOSURE AND DISPOSSESSION THAT THEY AND THEIR COMMUNITIES ARE EXPERIENCING, AND FINALLY, THE POSSIBILITIES OF BUILDING ECOLOGICAL COMMONS THAT OFFER HOPE FOR LIBERATION**

~ Ruth Nyambura, African Ecofeminist Collective

Given African womn's violent realities as a result of neoliberal water policies and practices, it is no surprise that they are at the forefront of organising around water justice. There have been many case studies of womn water activists from across the continent taking up various elements of this uphill struggle.

Likewise, there have been important inroads into developing an African feminist intersectional approach to water, as argued by Dorothy O Rombo, Anne Namatsi Lutomia and Tumani Malinga: "Intersectionality, which in this study highlights social inequalities

between women and men, can inform virtually every aspect of any analysis of water and sanitation."

Water and water justice issues typically intersect with wider feminist mobilisations around issues of land, health and livelihoods. Water is not just a 'thing' or a 'resource' that you either have or do not have. Feminist and political ecology perspectives understand water as a relational issue that is essentially about power. A feminist critique of the WASH approach would argue that it is limited as it treats the symptoms without addressing the wider political and economic

processes that African womn are part of and confronted with.

Feminists critically question how decisions about distribution of water and other resources are made and interrogate the legitimacy of these choices. A feminist approach to water justice centres frontline womn's experiences and seeks to understand the root causes of their problems. From this understanding we develop strategies and build power to solve the problems. Below is an example of how feminists in South Africa are organising and mobilising against neoliberal water policies.

Leigh Brownhill and Terisa E Turner (2019) Ecofeminism at the Heart of Ecosocialism, Capitalism Nature Socialism, 30:1, 1-10

Source: <https://msmagazine.com/2017/11/15/women-speak-ruth-nyambura-feminist-political-ecology/>

For example, see the case studies of Hubbie Hussein Al-Haji from Kenya, Asaha Elizabeth Ufei from Cameroon, and Coumba Toure from Senegal in: Lliane Loots. 2011. 'Revisiting gender ecology and eco-feminism: A profile of five contemporary women water activists', Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity, Vol. 25, No. 2 (88): The politics of water. 2011. pp. 6-16, and in: Koni Benson. 2020.

'Pan-Africanism, Feminism, and Popular Education in the Struggle Against Water Grabbing in Africa: An Interview with Coumba Toure', Agenda, 1-10.

Dorothy O Rombo, Anne Namatsi Lutomia, Tumani Malinga. 2017. 'Water and Sanitation in East Africa: Perspectives from Africana Feminism', Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies, Vol.10, No.5, p.192.

## EXAMPLE A:

# AFRICAN WATER COMMONS COLLECTIVE (AWCC), CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

The African Water Commons Collective (AWCC) is a coalition of water justice organisers working together for collective learning for mobilising and organising. It is a good example of ground-up, womn-led radical water justice work that is very different from the more liberal approaches to the human-right-to-water narratives described above, and challenges our ideas about 'water experts'.



We highlight this case as one that prioritises self-organising, direct-action and feminist political education, which aspires towards every member becoming an organiser ready to challenge the new norms of water poverty.

The AWCC does not have an office or any staff. It comprises predominantly black women living in townships and informal settlements organising politically, publicly and collectively against the privatisation of water, searching for strategies to fight for water access and justice-for-all (that is, the African water commons). It grew out of the Beacon Valley District Branch of the Cape Town Housing Assembly and a community-based initiative called Women for Change in the township of Mitchells Plain, which needed to mobilise around the implementation of water meters and against water cut-offs that from 2014 were being installed in increasingly backhanded ways.

Since then, it has developed a workshop series that has been used to map the water needs and uses of communities across the Cape Flats, established door-to-door work, speak-outs, pickets, leafleting, campaign tables and regular community meetings.

Through alliances with progressive feminist academics and land and water NGOs (such as the Blue Planet Project and the African Ecofeminist Collective), it has made links with water justice activists across South Africa and in Mexico, India, Canada, Mozambique, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Palestine, Ireland, USA (Detroit) and Bolivia. In 2017, during Cape Town's 'Day Zero' drought debacle, it was part of the establishment of the Water Crisis Coalition.

In 2018, it decided to consolidate its work across the city of Cape Town and establish a collective specifically aimed at supporting organisation-building around water justice and linking small struggles. As an initiative of very experienced frontline activists grappling with grassroots/NGO relationships, and taking into account the dynamics of leadership and funding, AWCC has been searching for forms of organising that can mitigate against hierarchy and maintain accountability.

This is very different to the dynamics we find in NGOs that focus on either climate or on women in Southern Africa. The AWCC's main aim is to support self-

organisation and mobilising resources for linking water struggles. It does this principally by assisting the establishment of Water Action Committees (WACs), which can work both autonomously as well as network with other organisations via AWCC. It provides political education, capacity building, strategies, networking and other forms of solidarity to build a stronger movement in Cape Town and beyond. It has also proved effective at bringing the water issues into a range of frontline activist spaces that it works across. It is also keenly aware of the gendered dynamics of personal and structural violence: "Almost all of our members are women, standing up against the most predatory practices of neoliberal capitalism that deepen poverty, racism, inequality and sexism in the name of profit and conservation, world-wide." Neoliberalism, the AWCC argues, pushes the burden of care (where water is needed for food, health and to be able to go to school) onto the shoulders of women as if this is their individual problem to solve.

While human rights-focused bodies will argue that new technologies are the gateway to water distribution, the AWCC describes water management devices (WMDs) as "weapons of mass destruction", precisely because of the drastic effect that water privatisation has on people who cannot pay for water, who, AWCC explains, are poor, black, township and rural women. WMDs include a type of smart meter that limits the amount of water a household receives in a day. The City of Cape Town has been rolling out WMDs in poor areas of Cape Town for a number of years. By the end of 2010, 45,000 had been installed. They are popularly known as the 'ufudo' or 'blue-top'. Ufudo is isiXhosa for tortoise, so named because these devices "hide in their shell and we can't see what's going on inside". In fact, when residents now buy pre-paid electricity vouchers, the municipality can redirect this money to pay for water it considers to be in arrears, as tracked by this new technology. The installation of these devices has been met with growing levels of resistance across the city. AWCC has learned both analysis and tactics from previous movements against water privatisation. The Declaration of the Coalition Against Water Privatisation, a founding organisation of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) which began in 2003 and officially closed in 2010, is as true today as it was then. The APF was central to challenging the private Johannesburg Water Company when it began



**THE AWCC TAKES ON THESE ISSUES THROUGH FEMINIST POLITICAL EDUCATION THAT EXPOSES HOW THESE FRAMEWORKS ARE CONSTRUCTED AND HOW COLLECTIVE PUBLIC POLITICAL ACTION IS ONE OF THE MOST ACCESSIBLE TOOLS FOR WOMN, WHO ALL SIT IN THEIR OWN HOMES SUFFERING FROM THE SAME PROBLEMS. FROM COLLECTIVE PROCESSES OF ANALYSIS, IT THEN PLANS ITS ACTION.**

installing meters in Phiri, Soweto. While it did not win its case legally, it gained enough political and media attention to ensure no WMDs were ever installed. Likewise in Cape Town in 2007, water activists were alerted to the fact that the authorities were rolling out a new kind of meter they called a “water management device”.

The South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) was quick to mount a campaign against the implementation of these meters in poor areas, describing it as an “utterly disgraceful initiative from the City that relies on people’s vulnerability and desperation”. SAMWU linked up with the South Africa Communist Party (SACP), NGOs and the “Water for All” campaign. But this entire campaign and all direct action associated with it were demobilised by 2010.

The weakening of unions and big water alliances that were formed in the early years of neoliberal reforms in South Africa is not just a South African trend. Our research has shown that this is a similar story across the continent.

In an interview with Public Services International, Africa, officials spoke about how many water workers’ unions across the continent were key to the leadership in large alliances but that, with the restructuring of the economy at large, they have been more likely to ally with their employers than with communities demanding water for all .

The AWCC takes on these issues through feminist political education that exposes how these frameworks are constructed and how collective public political

action is one of the most accessible tools for womn, who all sit in their own homes suffering from the same problems. From collective processes of analysis, it then plans its action. Its slogan in this regard is “everyone is an organiser” and it attempts to find a role for each womn who comes to join it.

For example, the AWCC has recently supported the organising of womn in the rural municipality of Witzenberg to be able to show up in groups ready to challenge another backhanded attempt to implement meters. Residents are receiving letters saying that eligibility for new policies for financial support for the poorest of the poor only come with the acceptance of a water meter. These women are then faced with armed law enforcers who attempt to intimidate them, as if they are stepping out of line by exercising their democratic right to question the legality of such policies. They are being framed as failing at motherhood/parenthood/ care of families and for wanting to greedily gobble up public coffers just for saying they cannot afford to pay for water and cannot live with water cut-offs. The AWCC has found that it is possible to say ‘no’ but is deeply concerned about the growing militarisation of state responses to activists. This has gotten worse during the Covid-19 pandemic, something we know is of concern to water activists as human rights defenders across the continent.

The AWCC sees Covid-19 as one more challenge that has exacerbated the problems of drought that poor women have been experiencing in Cape Town for decades. It follows from Day Zero, the water crisis of 2018 when the city came close to shutting off all taps because it was reduced to the last 10 percent of dam



water levels. The plan was for all residents to queue up for emergency water rations under watch of the army. The AWCC argued that the majority of those resident in informal settlements and substandard township housing have been living with Day Zero for more than 300 years.

It is critical of the fact that the only possible plan the City of Cape Town could come up with for access to water is the same as the first colonial dam construction laws, which brought policing and the military into the water cycle. Similar to what happened during the Covid-19 lockdown, the first Day Zero deaths were of citizens at the hands of the police.

Policing water scarcity is on the rise continent-wide. And within this dynamic, conservation is often used to legitimise extractive uses of natural resources. For example, in Cape Town there has been no attempt to curb corporate polluting of rivers, which could be viable sources of drinking water during drought. Where women have been cleaning up the banks of rivers such as Kails River that run through informal settlements and townships to grow food, for example, the city has been shutting down these spaces, arguing that the canals need protection. Likewise the city has been evicting people from shacks set up on open fields in an attempt to socially distance and to create community gardens, claiming that these are wetlands that need protection. This pitting of people's survival

against the need to conserve nature is a central concern for tackling the injustices that face women in relation to water and other natural resources across the continent. The pandemic continues to bring into sharp focus the contradictions of capitalism, the sexist, racist and classist legacies of apartheid and neoliberal globalisation. For many communities the AWCC organises in, access to water continues to be a myth, even in this period of desperation to wash hands. Its organising has been severely curtailed, and it is acutely aware that the gendered inequalities that their communities face have deepened.

The anti-capitalist, feminist analysis of the AWCC is rare. It is adamant that unchecked capitalist development – of industry, of an extractivist approach to land, of an approach to social reproduction – is the cause of increased cycles of drought and floods. Disaster capitalism sits in the wings waiting

to solve the problem it creates. The AWCC is consistent in its argument that the various water crises prompt more consultants and corporates to come in with technological and militarised strategies to commodify and individualise water use. However, this kind of approach requires constant political education and is a long slow haul in an urgent growing battle, not just against the cut-offs, but for the redistribution of water for people over profit.

### **THIS CASE STUDY RAISES KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER:**

1. The ideological arguments needed to challenge what constitutes basic/fair amounts of water needed to survive. Normalising lack of adequate allocation requires a gendered analysis and gendered policy given womn's gendered roles of being responsible for social reproduction
2. The importance of a radical feminist analysis that questions the neoliberal logics of water scarcity/inequalities
3. Womn's membership and leadership in community-based
4. Multi-pronged strategies of organising
5. Backlash and repression/demobilisation of activists, leaders, groups and organisations that take on corporate water – as seen in the previous wave of water activism in Cape Town, and as seen in the high levels of criminalisation of water activists during the current Covid-19 pandemic
6. The increasingly backhanded, reinvented ways in which the state is forcing residents to accept the meters (that is, give up their rights to water)
7. It highlights the ways in which the state and public sector are increasingly being run on a private/corporate cost recovery model yet lauded as modelling democratic social services/human right to water for all
8. It highlights what it takes to approach water justice struggles as intersectional and internationalist/pan-Africanist urgencies.



# THE HUMAN RIGHT TO WATER AND THE INTERNATIONAL WATER JUSTICE MOVEMENT



The global campaign for the human right to water began to gain momentum in the early 2000s. In 2010 this campaign, led by a number of international NGOs and grassroots activists describing themselves as the Global Water Justice Movement (GWJ), resulted in a UN General Assembly resolution that affirmed the existence of the human right to water and sanitation in international human rights law. This coalition has been part of organising a People's Alternative to the World Water Forum, which meets every two years and will be hosted on the continent for the first time in 2022.

It is adamant about the fight against the privatisation of water. Just a few years prior to the UN resolution, some of the world's most powerful corporations

began to gain new ground in their efforts to formalise their role in water policy discussions. Launched as a “public-private policy platform” at the 2008 World Economic Forum by the World Bank's International Financial Corporation (IFC), the 2030 Water Resources Group (WRG) brought together multinational corporations to discuss water policy with governments, regional development banks and multilateral aid agencies. It is a powerful corporate policy consortium spearheaded by the IFC, Nestlé, Coca-Cola and other multinationals that have been embroiled in high-profile struggles and legal disputes launched by communities challenging their access to or contamination of local water supplies.

It is important to track the tensions between the obligations of the duty-bearing state towards a rights-holding population and the role of the capitalist state in facilitating the reproduction of capital in the context of water scarcity. The 2030 WRG stated that its aim was to help “governments to catalyse sustainable water sector transformations in support of their economic growth plans”. In other words, the public private-policy platform was established to ensure that water shortages did not hinder the activities of industries contributing to “economic growth”. With the support of the IFC, the 2030 WRG would move rapidly to draft policy proposals seeking to institutionalise its access to water in the name of environmental sustainability.



This is part of a gold rush, with water being referred to as Blue Gold. As of June 2020, water ‘futures’ are now traded on the California stock exchange . According to the South African Reserve Bank, electricity and water costs are now the biggest inflation drivers in the country. Across the world, it is estimated that 10-60 per cent of water intended for households is lost through leaks in the delivery system or in the house. ‘Billable’ water is a new frontier for making profit, charging households for all water that leaves the ground, regardless of how much water ends up coming out the tap. This is all done in the name of the new norms of commodification and efficiency. Importantly, this is also being done in the name of ‘water for all’. In other words, the language of the left has been appropriated by privateers, whose websites and campaigns are often misleading due to the popular use of terms like sustainability and water for all. Urban Africa is

seen by water mongers as the next frontier. With the climate crisis, we will increasingly see measures like water management devices or desalination being purportedly introduced to deal with the climate crisis but that actually legitimise racist and classist politics.

Massive land grabs of discounted arable land from 2008 onwards in Niger, Mali, Ethiopia, DR Congo, Madagascar and Zambia, for example, have resulted in the theft of water and privatisation of some of the best watersheds that indigenous communities depend on for survival, argues Anuradha Mittal, founder and executive director of the Oakland Institute. We will see more corporate capture of our cities. We need to be aware of the dangers of disaster capitalism feeding off the narratives that African governments are dysfunctional and inept.

Meera Karunanathan. 2019. ‘Can the human right to water disrupt neoliberal water policies in the era of corporate policy-making?’ *Geoforum*, 28, 244-53

‘Water Financialization 101: Water Futures, Water Markets and Reclaiming the Water Commons’, a webinar hosted by Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Blue Planet Project, Food & Water Watch, and Transnational Institute about water futures and financialization on March 24, 2021 <https://www.iatp.org/event/water-financialization-101-water-futures-water-markets-and-reclaiming-water-commons>

‘Land Deal Brief: Land Grabs Leave Africa Thirsty’, Oakland Institute, 2011 <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/land-deal-brief-land-grabs-leave-africa-thirsty> <https://www.2030wrg.org/next-generation-urban-water-management/>

**MASSIVE LAND GRABS OF DISCOUNTED ARABLE LAND FROM 2008 ONWARDS IN NIGER, MALI, ETHIOPIA, DR CONGO, MADAGASCAR AND ZAMBIA, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE RESULTED IN THE THEFT OF WATER AND PRIVATISATION OF SOME OF THE BEST WATERSHEDS THAT INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES DEPEND ON FOR SURVIVAL, ARGUES ANURADHA MITTAL, FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE OAKLAND INSTITUTE.**

Feminist and anti-capitalists have pointed out how the 2030 WRG is part of the 50L coalition, which says access to water is a human right, using the example of Cape Town as a role model. Its rationale: three quarters of the world's largest 20 cities are experiencing water scarcity. Water insecurity has been a top five risk in the World Economic Forum Development Report for nine consecutive years.

An African eco-feminist perspective argues that unchecked capitalist development (of industry, of an extractivist approach to land, of an approach to social reproduction) is the cause of increased cycles of drought and floods, and disaster capitalism sits in the wings waiting to solve

the problem it creates. With water, this means more consultants and corporates proposing technological and militarised strategies to commodify and individualise water use. This directly contradicts the experiences and needs of women from the frontline of water struggles across Africa. At a recent webinar organised by feminist Pan-Africanists involved in the international water justice movement, women from Nigeria, South Africa, Detroit, Indonesia, Palestine and elsewhere spoke about these dynamics, reflecting on the 10 years since the declaration of the human right to water features women from Nigeria, South Africa, Detroit, Indonesia, Palestine, and more.


Leigh Brownhill and Terisa E Turner. 2019. 'Ecofeminism at the Heart of Ecosocialism', *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 30:1, 1-10

Lobina, Emanuele, Satoko Kishimoto and Olivier Petitjean. 2014. 'Here to Stay: Water Remunicipalisation as a Global Trend', Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU), Transnational Institute (TNI) and Multinational Observatory.



## EXAMPLE B:

# PRE-PAID WATER METERS / WATER CITIZENS NETWORK, GHANA



The case of Ghana's struggle to re-municipalise its water services is instructive, both in terms of understanding the history of water justice-mobilising in Africa and also for highlighting what campaign work requires and the challenges of achieving a gender justice framework.

Between 2004-2015, the Water Citizens Network of Ghana launched three successful campaigns to prevent the Ghanaian government's multiple attempts to work with private companies and implement metering schemes. This was at a time when Ghana was going through severe economic stress, which rendered the imposition of the feared pre-paid water meters more a case of "when" rather than "if". The state-run Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL) was working in the context of a high national budget deficit, which limited the government's ability to provide the required subsidies to utility agencies.

At the close of 2012, the country recorded a deficit of \$4.6 billion, about 12.1 percent of GDP. As a result, an IMF/World Bank bailout was arranged in 2013, resulting in austerity policies, including a doubling down on the demand for full-cost recovery in public services. In a bitter public face-off between the World Bank and Ghana's Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC), the Bank had accused the Commission of incompetence in managing tariff adjustments and, as a result, tariffs remained frozen for some time. Furthermore, an energy crisis increased the cost of doing business for most enterprises, including the GWCL.

In 2004, the GWCL contracted a private company, Aquamet, to help implement pre-paid water meters. The scheme was carried out as a pilot project in Ghana's foremost industrial city, Tema. Following closed-doors deliberations, the public was told that services and revenue collection would be improved. However, a study of the United Nations Development

Programme's report, which informed the decision to pursue pre-paid meters, shows that GWCL and other stakeholders were motivated by the desire to raise tariffs and ensure payment compliance.

The report showed how a bucket of water supplied by GWCL to customers cost GH 70, while a bucket supplied by commercial groups was between GH 200 and GH 400. Furthermore, an Aquamet report about the bidding process reveals a closed process and a financial arrangement shrouded in secrecy.

The new programme required citizens to pay for water in advance, thereby solving GWCL's huge customer debt problem. Aquamet, therefore, became the "expert revenue collector", amassing huge sums of easy money from pre-paid meters whose costs were to be met by the GWCL.

Residents were led to believe that pre-paid metering would put them in charge of their water consumption and help them eliminate waste, ultimately reducing how much they paid for water. For a few months, people bought into the idea. However, unregulated and arbitrary price increments began to ignite anxiety. The costly meters also proved faulty, randomly cutting off household water. Eventually, GWCL cancelled the contract.

In February 2014, discussions about pre-paid water metering resurfaced in the Ghana media when PURC endorsed a GWCL proposal to launch another pilot installation in selected communities. The Ministry of Water Resources Works and Housing argued that "prepaid meters have become necessary because

**WHAT TURNED THE TIDE WAS THE INTENSE MEDIA CAMPAIGN WAGED BY ACTIVIST GROUPS LIKE THE WATER CITIZENS NETWORK OF GHANA AND INTEGRATED SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE (ISODEC). THIS MEDIA CAMPAIGN WAS PICKED UP BY MAINSTREAM NEWS OUTLETS AND THE PRE-PAID WATER ISSUE DOMINATED MORNING SHOWS AND PRIME TIME AFTERNOON NEWS.**



of the wilful non-payment of bills by several large-scale water users.” With all the key governmental agencies, including the regulator, in agreement about going forward with the policy shift, almost no avenue remained open for the scheme’s opponents to overturn the planned pilot project. Despite these odds, civil society managed to halt the process. What turned the tide was the intense media campaign waged by activist groups like the the Water Citizens Network of Ghana and Integrated Social Development Centre (ISODEC). This media campaign was picked up by mainstream news outlets and in February and March 2014 the pre-paid water issue dominated morning shows and prime time afternoon news. Activists produced reports on the failed Tema project of 10 years previously, while existing frustration with recently installed electricity pre-paid meters also came into play.

Another factor that contributed to the campaign’s success was the connection civil society groups made between water meters and public health. Activists used cases from Birmingham in the UK and South Africa to show how the introduction of water meters had led to the outbreak of cholera and dysentery in poor neighbourhoods.

Despite most government water sector agencies still in agreement about the implementation of the prepaid water meters, parliament began to feel

the pressure of the campaign and lawmakers took their constituents’ concerns seriously enough to step in and halt the process, saying that the water sector agencies had been unable to provide certain details asked of them about the project. This marked the end of the second attempt to install pre-paid water meters in Ghana.

Far from the policy being laid to rest, in July 2015 there was a renewed and more vigorous push for it when the acting managing director of the GWCL announced that another rollout of pre-paid meters would take place the following month in order to “avoid incurring unnecessary losses emanating from non-payment of water bills by most consumers”; to address the “struggle to collect bills from consumers”;

and to quell the “violent attacks and molestations against GWCL workers in their quest to collect water

bills or disconnect people who are engaged in illegal tapping of water.” It was left to water activists to point out that 61 percent of GWCL’s accumulated debt was owed by the government of Ghana and therefore unable to be recovered via a prepaid water regime. As before, civil society groups like the Water Citizens Network of Ghana swiftly mobilised against this third attempt to install pre-paid water meters. The sustained opposition prompted the GWCL to announce certain caveats to the policy, saying that the pilot project would not be undertaken in low income areas but would focus on rich gated communities.

The immediate response from the opposition was, what would be the use of a trial in communities with purchasing power and few issues of water access? Finally conceding that one of its main weak points was revenue collection, the company scrapped pre-paid water meters in June 2016 in favour of so-called water scratch cards, an electronic billing system using mobile technology in tandem with GWCL payment scratch cards. Although the move indicated that the authorities were beginning to come to terms with the intense public aversion to prepaid water meters, scratch cards in Ghana continue to pose challenges for the human right to water and civil society’s objective of universal access. As soon as scratch cards were implemented, the company was getting its disconnection teams ready.

The above shows that there is an assumption that African governments are inept at providing public services to their citizens and therefore the most efficient route is that of consultants and corporations. It also challenges the idea of passive citizens as well as the notion that there is no stopping the wave of corporate take-overs of water services on the continent. Importantly for us here, it also reveals the work ahead and the clear need

for campaigns that link womn’s challenges over water with often male-led, anti-privatisation campaigns, which highlight the non-democratic practices of corporate deals and challenge the corporate control of our municipal services as if such issues are disconnected from womn’s daily quest to provide water in the home.





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# ORGANISATIONS WORKING ON WOMN

## AND WATER IN AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW

**" BUT YOU CAN'T SPLIT PEOPLE! WE ARE  
WHOLE COMMUNITIES, AND ISSUES ARE  
CONNECTED**

~ Coumba Toure, Africans Rising

**BY SHARING OUR FINDINGS, WE AIM TO  
SHOW THAT WATER IS RARELY THE ONLY  
ISSUE THAT ORGANISATIONS FOCUS ON  
AND THAT THERE ARE MANY GAPS IN  
FEMINIST MOBILISATIONS FOR WATER  
JUSTICE, PROMPTING THE NEED TO  
CONSIDER THE POLITICS, ECONOMICS,  
ECOLOGY AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF  
WOMN'S WATER CHALLENGES.**

This section uses a table to provide an overview of or-rganisations undertaking water justice and related work in Africa. It provides the names of the organisations, their footprint and scope of work. These bodies include those with a local, regional and international focus. Given that water is an intersectional issue, the research found that not all organisations working on water profile themselves as 'water organisations'; however, water features in organisa-tions whose main identity includes land, agriculture, health, climate change, environmental justice and poverty allevia-tion. In addition, this section provides an example of water roundtables to demonstrate how various organisations come together to learn from each other and strategise their efforts to strengthen movement-building and collaborate on campaigns.

Benson, Koni. 2020. 'Pan-Africanism, Feminism, and Popular Education in the Struggle Against Water Grabbing in Africa: An Interview with Coumba Toure', Agenda, 1-10 Interview with Olatunji Buhari, 20 February 2021





There is important advocacy, research and movement-building activities taking place on the continent that focus on water and water-related issues of food, health, environment and education. It points out where there is a neoliberal framework, because this is where most of the resources that fund projects around women and water come from, and it shows where we have found a radical feminist or anti-capitalist agenda. Furthermore, it tracks the scope, whether local, national or international, and the regions of the continent covered.

As mentioned in the methodology section above, this research has not been comprehensive or exhaustive, but by sharing our findings in this chart we aim to show that water is rarely the only issue that organisations focus on and that there are many gaps in feminist mobilisations for water justice, prompting the need to consider the politics, economics, ecology and cultural dynamics of women's water challenges.

A significant finding is that some water justice campaigns, like Our Water, Our Rights in Lagos, Nigeria, are important for

challenging water privatisation through civil society mobilisations. However the campaign, led by Environmental Rights Action (ERA), the Nigerian chapter of Friends of the Earth International (FoEI), does not have a strong gender focus or emphasis on feminist movement-building. In 2020, a few of the leading activists from ERA formed a new group, Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa (CAPPA), with the idea of creating a platform for a continent-wide water campaign and to develop a stronger women's leadership. Another significant finding is that there A significant



finding is that some water justice campaigns, like Our Water, Our Rights in Lagos, Nigeria, are important for challenging water privatisation through civil society mobilisations. However the campaign, led by Environmental Rights Action (ERA), the Nigerian chapter of Friends of the Earth International (FoEI), does not have a strong gender focus or emphasis on feminist movement-building. In 2020, a few of the leading activists from ERA formed a new group, Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa (CAPPA), with the idea of creating a platform for a continent-wide water campaign and to develop a stronger women's leadership.

There have been attempts to address the ways in which water struggles are embedded in other struggles – food, land, housing, public services etc. For example, in South Africa water justice activists were engaged

in a process that brought together campaigners from various organisations dealing with water issues, even if it was not necessarily their main focus, in order to discuss the prospects of a People's Alternative to the state's approach to the water crisis. Between 2017 and 2019, a series of three Water Justice Roundtables was hosted by the AWCC, the Blue Planet Project, Surplus People Project, Environmental and Monitoring Group and Tshintsha Amakhaya. More than 45 organisations were brought together with a shared sense of inability to tackle the challenges of water distribution alone. Small-scale farmers and urban community associations from informal settlements and townships got together with activists, academics and NGOs to discuss a collective, people-centred response to water scarcity in South Africa. The collective challenges, demands and strategies are captured in the posters below.





**A significant finding is that some water justice campaigns, like Our Water, Our Rights in Lagos, Nigeria, are important for challenging water privatisation through civil society mobilisation.**

# WATER JUSTICE ROUNDTABLES

The Water Justice Roundtables (WJRTs) were a series of three workshops that met in South Africa between September 2018 and July 2019. Organisers aimed to bring together activists and groups from all parts of the country who were working against the exclusion of poor people from water access, corporate profiteering from water, and unsustainable management of water resources.

## HOST ORGANISATIONS

**African Water Commons Collective (AWCC)**  
Social justice for working class and poor communities  
Movement building  
Community organising  
Water Action Committees  
Direct action against water cut offs and prepaid water meters  
**Blue Planet**  
Building a water justice movement  
Fought for the historic 2010 UN resolution affirming the Human Right to Water and Sanitation  
Work with allied organizations and affected communities to ensure its realization  
Grant making for water justice organising

**Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG)**  
Environmental justice  
Supporting water justice struggles of communities  
Uniting communities through the Water Caucus  
Awareness raising  
**Surplus People Project (SPP)**  
Land and agrarian reform  
Food sovereignty  
Fight for water reform as part of land and agrarian reform  
Unite rural and urban water justice struggles

**Tshintsha Amakhaya (TA)**  
Land and food justice  
Rural livelihoods  
Support struggles for water access for small scale farmers and rural households  
Unite rural and urban water justice struggles

## PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

### NATIONAL, CONTINENTAL AND GLOBAL

**Via Campesina**  
Agro-ecology, food sovereignty  
**Catholic Welfare & Development**  
Develop people to rise out of poverty

### WESTERN CAPE / NORTHERN CAPE

**Bambanani Women's Group, Mfuleni**  
Grow vegetables, no to water cut offs

**Swartland Farmers Association, Swartland**  
Organise small scale farmers, water access for small scale farmers

**Wupperthal-Nuwepeplaas Farmers Association, Wupperthal**  
Grow crops, organise small scale farmers, campaign for water reform

**Ebenezer Youth, Ebenezer**  
Crop farming  
Organise young small scale farmers, lobby and campaign for water access for small scale farmers

**Riversdale Farmers group, Riversdale**  
Organise small scale farmers

**Heidelberg Farmers group, Heidelberg**  
Organise small scale farmers

**Thembaletu Land Occupation, George**  
Occupy land  
**Witzenberg Rural Development Centre, Ceres**  
Support community struggles around housing, water, workers rights, etc

**Housing Assembly, Western Cape**  
Housing for all

**Bishop Lavis Action Community, Bishop Lavis**  
Organise community struggles against crime and gangsters, stop evictions

**Saldanha Bay Sustainable Development, Saldanha**  
Support for eradication of water meter devices, full utilization of the sea for recreation and job creation for local people

**Ithemba Farmers, Eerste River**  
Organise small scale farmers, no to water cut-offs

**Ekasi Green Project, Khayelitsha**  
Grow crops

**AIDC, Cape Town**  
Research and education NGO, forging alliances built on an alternative development strategy which is low carbon, wage led, economically sustainable and equitable

**Women for Change (W4C), Mitchells Plain**  
Organising women's struggles

### EASTERN CAPE

**Southern Cape Land Committee (SCLC), Southern Cape**  
Stop fracking in the Karoo, water access for small scale producers, land agrarian justice

**Eastern Cape Water Caucus, Eastern Cape**  
Unites communities fighting water justice struggles, restoration of windmills, peoples memorandum for climate justice

**Unemployed Peoples Movement, Makhanda**  
Organise community struggles against unemployment, water cut-offs, etc

**Border Rural Community, Eastern Cape**  
Fight to access dam water which is only given to those who can buy permits

**Transkei Land Service Organization, Eastern Cape**  
Access and ownership to land and in support of local people and indigenous water harvesting



**Water Crisis Coalition (WCC),  
Cape Town**

Fight commodification of water, stand up for poor communities

**The Alternative Energy Popular Education Programme, Cape Town**

Work with learners and students on renewable energy, present radio programme on renewables

**International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), Cape Town**

Research and education NGO, focus on globalisation

**Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), Cape Town**

Law clinic, advocating and litigating for environmental justice

**Witzenberg Water Action Committee, Ceres**

Campaign against prepaid water meters, fight farm evictions

**Food Sovereignty Campaign, Western and Northern Cape**

Organise small scale farmers and farm workers, agrarian reform for food sovereignty

**Goodhouse community, Goodhouse, Northern Cape**

Organise rural community, campaign against flooding of community by new dam

**Mxumbu Youth Agri Co-Op, Eastern Cape**

Chicken farming, organising young farmers, permaculture agriculture

**Environmental Learning Research Centre, Rhodes University**

Exploring questions relating to learning / education that is responsive to the environmental challenges we are facing

## GAUTENG

**Tembalihle Crisis Committee (TCC), Tembalihle**

Organise community struggles

**Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO), Germiston**

Support struggles of labour broker workers

**Simunye Workers Forum, Germiston**

Build solidarity among workers

**Co-Operative and Policy Alternative Centre (COPAC), Gauteng**

Works with small farmers, presented alternative food act to parliament, busy mobilising support for climate justice charter

**Voice of the Concerned Poor Residents (VPCR), Johannesburg**

## MPUMALANGA

**Mpumalanga Water Caucus, Mpumalanga**

Uniting community struggles for water justice, fighting mining companies and timber plantations who pollute and deplete water

**Nosizwe Funda Educational and Community Development Center, Dimbaza**

Marching against big corporations, Capitalism, drought and climate change

**Ntinga Ntaba kaNdoda Rural Movement, Keiskammahoek**

Mobilise for democracy, land reform and sustainable rural development

**Amandla Resource and Information Centre, Port Elizabeth**

Community library and gardens, part of Assembly of the Unemployed and 1million climate jobs campaign

## KWAZULU-NATAL

**Farmer Support Group, KwaZulu-Natal**

Action research, support for sustainable agro-ecology agriculture and self-organization

**Poor Flatdwellers Movement, Durban**

Involved in discussion on climate change, taking up drought related water issues

## ZIMBABWE

**Amandla Centre of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe**

Pushing for safe and clean water at all times

## ENGLAND

**Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU), London**

Investigates the impact of privatisation and liberalisation on public services including water

## LIMPOPO

**Nkuzi Development Trust**

Fighting for water rights for black people granted land

**Calabash Trust, Port Elizabeth**

Research natural assets, indigenous knowledge and faith communities

**Jongilala Education Collaboration and McWilliams Consultants, Eastern Cape**

Educational consultant

**Grahamstown Residents Association (GRA), Eastern Cape**

These processes, which collectively map the needs, the resources and the gaps in moving forward in the struggle for water justice, show us that campaigns and campaigners need to come together if a feminist, anti-capitalist and continent-wide, Pan-Africanist movement for womn and water in Africa is to be brought about. We found, for example, that Just Associates (JASS) has a feminist movement-building approach without a specific focus on water. At the same time, some of the organisations that focus on water or on womn lack a feminist movement-building approach.

JASS supports the work of rural womn in Malawi who struggle with water, among other issues, and is therefore a good example of an organisation with a Pan-Africanist, feminist approach to movement-building but which does not consider itself a womn and water organisation. From JASS we would draw on an approach that can be used more widely when it comes to water politics.

# WATER JUSTICE ROUNDTABLES

## PROBLEMS, DEMANDS + STRATEGIES

### WHAT ARE WE UP AGAINST?

Drought • Water scarcity • Day Zero • Climate change  
• Mismanagement • Dysfunction of the Dept. of Water and Sanitation • Collapse of water management • Water Tribunal not functioning • Catchment Management Agencies not functioning • Failure to implement laws and policies • Ministers do not respond • Little or no consultation on key issues • Makhanda collapsed water management • Municipalities dysfunctional • Massive leaks of treated water • Sewage leaks and spills • Policy uncertainty • Financial mismanagement • Corruption • Rural areas excluded from IDPs • Corporations control water access • Corporate domination of policy making • Privatisation • 2030 Water Resources Groups • Strategic Water Partners Network • Cost recovery from poor communities • Profiteering from water • Racist and sexist patterns of water access • Big business is given priority • White suburbans pay for privileged access • Prepaid Water Meters • Neoliberal Capitalism • Cut-offs to poor communities • Unaffordable water tariffs • No water for small scale farmers • Less than 3% of water goes to black farmers  
• Water poverty • Water inequality • Water access used as bargaining chip by municipalities • Lack of unity between water justice groups

The Water Justice Roundtables (WJRTs) were a series of three workshops that brought together over 45 different organisations in South Africa between September 2018 and July 2019. The Roundtables were cohosted by the Blue Planet Project, the African Water Commons Collective, Surplus People Project, Environmental Monitoring Group, and Tshintsha Amakhaya. Organisers aimed to bring together activists and groups from all parts of the country who were working against the exclusion of poor people from water access, corporate profiteering from water, and unsustainable management of water resources.

# WATER JUSTICE ROUNDTABLES

## PROBLEMS, DEMANDS + STRATEGIES

### WHAT ARE WE FOR? AIMS AND DEMANDS

Water justice • Equal access • Equality in decision making power • Reject Capitalist government • Fight government and business • Access to water for all • Prioritise people over industry • Allocate water for black emerging farmers • Change system of land ownership and use • Keep Water Catchment Forums decentralised • Increase number of Water Catchment Forums • Allocate water by number of people in household • Alternative Food Act • Food sovereignty • Water sovereignty • Knowledge sovereignty • Industry must pay more than domestic users • Protect environment • Fight climate change • People and the planet above profit • Permaculture • Agro-ecology • Implement progressive policies • Stop building big dams • Relook at agricultural methods • Public services must be public • No privatisation • No cost recovery • No corporate management models • Scrap water debt • No prepaid water meters • No commodification of public goods • Free water • Enough water • Municipalities should not be forced to raise their own money • Community development • Accountability of municipalities • Reclaim our commons • Review long term corporate agreements • Hold private sector accountable • Tenders must go • Agro-mining must provide reparations, recognition, rehabilitation • Councillors must be controlled by the people • Government must respond to civil society • Financial transparency • Stop water sabotage • Fix leaks • Functional billing systems • Proper sewage management • Fix windmills • Water for infrastructure • Scoop small dams to clean them • Build small dams instead of big ones • One house; one JoJo tank • Yard water connection for all • People should know about water quality • Clean the rivers • Maintain and repair boreholes • Fair filling systems • Safe drinking water • Education and training around access to water and self-management • More community participation in IDPs

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# WATER JUSTICE ROUNDTABLES

## PROBLEMS, DEMANDS + STRATEGIES

### HOW DO WE GET THERE? STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

Water Justice Roundtables • People's plan for water justice • Share information • Reflect on strategies • Translocal solidarity • Monitor at international level • Link local with international • Local groups at the centre of strategy • AccountaLink local strategies • Contest control of decision making about water • Build bridges across rural-urban divide • Unite small farmers, informal settlements, townships, activists, academics, and NGOs • Unite grassroots communities with progressive researchers • Reach out to residents not yet included

- Develop accessible language • Build trust between water justice activists • Find out true picture of corporate water use • Wealth redistribution • Land redistribution • Decolonisation • A pan-Africanist approach • Strengthen community organising • Develop practical alternatives • Contest law-making and policy processes • Build community water caucuses • Farm water action committees • Gap tap gatherings • Participatory action research
- Support climate justice charter • Mobilise civil society • Build a movement • Develop links with NGOs • Work with experts in law and science • Engage within communities
- Solidarity actions linked to other struggles • Gendered analysis of water struggles • Living wage campaign • Create education material and training resources • Map water resources • Community water profiles • Politicise the tap • Create a communication strategy • Direct actions • Occupy resources and assets • Defend indigenous knowledge • Community control of water • Asset based community development
- Water harvesting • Water permaculture • Grey water use • Use hand-made pumps • People's plumbers to fix leaks and connect pipes • Create co-operatives • Plan engagements with authorities • Speak outs • Civil disobedience • Mass meetings • Night vigils for water • Lobby for decentralisation and expansion of Catchment Management Association system • Alternative plan for water justice to suggest to people • Put in place strategy development processes

The Water Justice Roundtables (WJRTs) were a series of three workshops that brought together over 45 different organisations in South Africa between September 2018 and July 2019. The Roundtables were cohosted by the Blue Planet Project, the African Water Commons Collective, Surplus People Project, Environmental Monitoring Group, and Tshintsha Amakhaya. Organisers aimed to bring together activists and groups from all parts of the country who were working against the exclusion of poor people from water access, corporate profiteering from water, and unsustainable management of water resources.

**Our feminist movement building approach enables the conditions for women to organize, mobilize and transform power in four interconnected areas of their lives:**

**VOICE:** Women gain freedom of expression and the right to participate, and have a voice and power

**SAFETY & PROTECTION:** (collective strategies – alliances, collaborations, and protection networks – that offer the power of numbers for impact and safety): Women feel safe to be who they are in all aspects of their lives, in their homes, workplaces, organizations and the streets, and can exercise their rights and participate politically without facing violence



**RESOURCES:** (access to land, water and public services, and the recognition of formal, informal and care work): Women sustain livelihoods and labor rights, access to public services and the ability to sustainably use and protect their land, forests & water

**BODIES:** (Gender justice, health, sexual and reproductive rights, identity, and wellbeing): Women have bodily integrity and autonomy, including on sex and sexuality, reproductive and sexual rights, gender identity, health, and wellbeing, and are free from violence.

**JASS ANNUAL REPORT 2019: FEMINIST MOVEMENT BUILDING APPROACH**

## EXAMPLE C:

# WOMIN BUILDING AFRICAN ECO-FEMINIST DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVES

WoMin is a Johannesburg-based organisation comprising a team of activists, thinkers, practitioners and researchers from across the continent and around the world.

WoMin engages in research, feminist schools, exchanges, solidarity, organising and campaigns in partnership with organisations in 13 countries in Africa.





WoMin is a Johannesburg-based organisation comprising a team of activists, thinkers, practitioners and researchers from across the continent and around the world . WoMin engages in research, feminist schools, exchanges, solidarity, organising and campaigns in partnership with organisations in 13 countries in Africa. In each of them, WoMin partners with one or two organisations that share a complementary perspective and strategy. The focus of the work is on supporting womn, communities and environmental defenders affected by, and fighting against, extractivist profit-oriented development projects such as mining and mega dams.

It argues that an extractivist economy is violent as it destroys ecosystems in water bodies, forests, land and communities. Workers and womn in extractive communities experience extreme exploitation of their labour and bodies as well as increased violence, and sexual violence, by military and private security agents present in these areas. WoMin promotes African Ecofeminist Development Alternatives, as explained on its website:

**WoMin seeks to uncover, build and advance African ecofeminist development alternatives (the YES) to dominant destructive extractivism. This entails building African ecofeminist perspectives, conceptualising, and advancing an African Ecofeminist concept of the Just Transition, defining just renewable energy alternatives, and supporting the democratisation of decision-making through struggles for consent rights of women and their communities. In supporting feminist organising and movement-building, we assist peasant and working-class women advance alternative power, claim their development sovereignty, and build their imagination and proposals for a different Africa.**



<https://womin.africa/development-alternatives/>  
<https://womin.africa/a-cry-for-water-women-across-south-africa-demand-their-right-to-water-life/> <https://womin.africa/c19-womens-solidarity-forum/>

WoMin is part of a continental project which aims to support rural and marginalised women across the continent dream of a different community, nation and Africa, identify and support living alternatives, and build a collective vision expressed through an African Women's Charter .

In 2018, WoMin published the Mogale Declaration in solidarity with peasant and working-class womn as they build a collective vision for a just and sustainable future. The Declaration is supported by several representatives of civil society organisations such as Friends of the Earth members, JASS, the Rural Women's Assembly and a number of academic institutions. The Declaration is seen as "the birth of a process of building an African ecofeminist charter for a just transition". The content

of what this "just transition" exactly is should be driven by the perspectives and interests of African womn in communities, people's organisations and movements. To this end, WoMin published a brochure in 2019 titled 'If another world is possible, who is doing the imagining? Building an ecofeminist development alternative in a time of deep systemic crisis'. The process of building just development alternatives is ongoing.

In a blog post that reports on experiences of rural women in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic, water is said to be "one of the most burning issues". There are many rural communities without reliable access to water and womn's protests and demands have been met with repression by the state. During the Covid-19 lockdown, WoMin published a statement with the C19 Women's Solidarity Forum in which they made an urgent request to the South African president to address the water crisis.

Emem J Okon of the Kebetkache Women Development and Resource Centre, Rivers State, Nigeria (Rivers is in the oil-producing Niger Delta region where womn struggle daily with polluted streams, creeks and boreholes), is part of the WoMin network and was one of the speakers in a webinar that reflected on gender and water on the 10th anniversary of Human Right to Water becoming international law. This webinar was organised by the Blue Planet Project with international water justice movement allies and drew together black womn from the frontlines of water struggles, including South Africa, Indonesia, Detroit, Palestine and Mexico. It was clear from this webinar that there is a need to share knowledge and strategies from these struggles across Africa and the global south. They are our barometers for where the struggles for womn and water have reached, where we need to go and how we plan to get there.

**IN 2018, WOMIN PUBLISHED THE MOGALE  
DECLARATION IN SOLIDARITY WITH PEASANT AND  
WORKING-CLASS WOMN AS THEY BUILD A COLLECTIVE  
VISION FOR A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE.  
THE DECLARATION IS SUPPORTED BY SEVERAL  
REPRESENTATIVES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS  
SUCH AS FRIENDS OF THE EARTH MEMBERS, JASS,  
THE RURAL WOMEN'S ASSEMBLY AND A NUMBER OF  
ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS**

## CONCLUSION:

# TOWARDS A WATER JUSTICE CAMPAIGN IN AFRICA

**CHALLENGING WATER POLICY CAN BE DANGEROUS, AS WE KNOW THROUGH OUR WORK WITH WOMN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE STRUGGLES. ACTIVISTS HAVE BEEN TARGETED AND KILLED WHILE FIGHTING CORPORATIONS AND GOVERNMENTS. IN THIS CONTEXT, THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO STRENGTHEN FRONTLINE FEMINISTS ORGANISING AROUND WATER AND TO BUILD SOLIDARITY BETWEEN PEOPLE IN DIFFERENT PLACES.**

At the same time, activist groups that reject neoliberal water policies are resisting and organising, although they experience a number of challenges, particularly a lack of resources. In this context, there is an urgent need to strengthen frontline activists and feminists organising around water and to build solidarity between people in different places.

At the moment, there is no continent-wide network of groups that primarily organise around water justice. This is a gap we find worrying as foreign investors and governments are looking to open up Africa's water markets. There are organisational challenges around resources and sharing a common language and politics. Moreover, challenging water policy can be dangerous, as we know through our

work with womn human rights defenders in environmental justice struggles. Activists have been targeted and killed while fighting corporations and governments. In this context, there is an urgent need to strengthen frontline feminists organising around water and to build solidarity between people in different places.

In order to intervene in this crisis, this water justice campaign will aim to strengthen organising and connecting African womn in frontline water justice formations. It will also aim to engage in critical conversations and feminist analysis of water justice struggles with African womn and womn's organisations and develop alternatives to the dominant water governance neoliberal model.



# RECOMMENDATIONS: DISRUPTING THE TIDE OF NEOLIBERAL WATER POLITICS IN AFRICA

## THIS CASE STUDY RAISES KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER:

- Support water justice campaigns that focus on strengthening grassroots organising and feminist movement-building. This includes womn's groups and communities which do not necessarily identify as 'water organisations' but mobilise around issues linked to water such as land, housing and extractives.
- Take the opportunity of the People's Alternative World Water Forum in Dakar in 2022 to build solidarity with grassroots groups and movements, link water struggles, generate counter-narratives and share knowledge, strategies and stories that will inspire the continental and global fight for water justice and social justice.
- As many grassroots formations and activists are not necessarily in organisations or NGOs. Funders should support and strengthen self-organisation of grantees and link up with more grassroots and womn's groups on the continent to connect struggles and build solidarity.
- Support an Africa-wide feminist water justice campaign to complement and challenge development and apolitical approaches to water struggles through analysing the root causes of womn's problems with water and wider social injustices.
- Catalyse critical conversations and debates that help with shaping agendas through strategic convenings to build a feminist perspective and practice in fighting for democratic community control of and access to water
- Build capacity of womn's rights organisations that engage with environmental and climate justice in Africa to develop popular and political education on water justice struggles.
- Provide targeted grant-making in the field of water justice and feminist movement building.

Finally, recommend more collaborative research with activists into existing water justice struggles led by women and feminists across the continent. We are aware that we were only able to 'see' a particular picture of what water justice struggles currently look like. We know there are many women who fight, organise and challenge power to liberate themselves and their communities from injustice and oppression. Their experiences and stories are not visible on the internet or in NGO reports. Neoliberalism attempts to make water politics invisible. Therefore, insisting on a feminist analysis of power in relation to water justice is one contribution to disrupting this tide.



**There is an urgent need to strengthen frontline feminists organising around water and to build solidarity between people in different places.**

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Transnational Institute, Public is Back Webinar with Aderonke Ige on 'Our Water, Our Rights Campaign' in Lagos, Nigeria <https://www.tni.org/en/article/public-is-back-proposals-for-a-democratic-just-economy-webinar-recording>

Ruth Nyambura <https://www.newsclick.in/ruth-nyambura-venezuelan-revolution-african-revolution>

WoMin Webinar: how to support women's organising in a time of crisis? <https://womin.africa/womens-organising-in-a-time-of-crisis-lessons-from-the-learning-exchange/>

Water Justice in the time of Covid 19, a blog by Meera Karunanathan, which includes an overview of and link to audio of a webinar: <https://canadians.org/analysis/water-justice-time-covid-19>

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# WEBSITES ORGANISATIONS

ActionAid <https://actionaid.org/>

Africans Rising: [www.africans-rising.org](http://www.africans-rising.org)

Aruwe <https://www.aruweug.org/water-sanitation>

Blue Planet Project [www.blueplanetproject.net](http://www.blueplanetproject.net)

Care International <https://www.care-international.org/>

COPAC <https://copac.org.za/>

Earthlife <https://earthlife.org.za/>

Embrace Relief <https://www.embracerelief.org/>

Environmental Rights Action, Nigeria <https://erafoen.org>

Friends of the Earth South Africa, Groundwork [www.foei.org/member-groups/africa-2/south-africa](http://www.foei.org/member-groups/africa-2/south-africa)

Friends of the Earth Mozambique / JA! Justicia Ambiental <https://ja4change.org>

Gender and Water Alliance <http://genderandwater.org/en/about-the-gender-and-water-alliance>

JASS <https://www.justassociates.org/>

Natural Justice <https://naturaljustice.org/>

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WaterAid <https://www.wateraid.org/>

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WoMin <https://womin.africa/>

World Vision <https://www.worldvision.org/>

## INTERVIEWEES

**Aderonke Ige** (email) 1 March 2021  
*Human Rights. Development. Social impact.*

**Carol Werunga** (Zoom) 19 February 2021  
*Urgent Action Fund-Africa, Programme Coordinator Solidarity and Support*

**David Boys** (Zoom) 04 March 2021  
*Public Services International, Deputy General Secretary*

**Koni Benson** (Zoom) 18 February 2021  
*Historian, organiser and educator. Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa*

**Meera Karunananthan** (Zoom) 22 February 2021  
*Blue Planet Project*

**Ndana Bofu-Tawamba** (Zoom) 24 February 2021  
*Urgent Action Fund-Africa, Executive Director*

**Olatunji Buhari** (email) 20 February 2021  
*Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa (CAPPA)*

**Shinaz Ali** (Zoom) 23 February 2021  
*Urgent Action Fund-Africa, Feminist Republik Culture Curator*



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