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## Human Rights Council

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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **Written statement\* submitted by India Water Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 January 2024]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Attaining Healthy Environment by Clean Water and Proper Sanitation**

The challenges in the environment sector are so grave that we really need to collaborate much more seriously if we are going to make significant progress on achieving the SDGs. I dare to believe that more cooperation will lead to the quadrupling of impact that we are aiming for, since we can do more, better, when we tackle it together. Water is deemed a dealmaker for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Water is also considered as a global public good and access to safe, affordable and reliable drinking water and sanitation services are basic human rights. They are indispensable to sustaining healthy livelihoods and maintaining people's dignity. Human rights to water and sanitation are essential for eradicating poverty, building peaceful and prosperous societies, and ensuring that 'no one is left behind' on the road towards sustainable development. Water is not just a sector but a connector and a development and economic indicator.

International human rights law obliges States to work towards achieving universal access to water and sanitation for all, without any discrimination, while prioritizing those most in need. It would not be wrong to say that Water and sanitation run across the entire 2030 Agenda while having a cross-sectoral impact. However, contrary to its centrality and importance for the well-being of people, planet, peace, and prosperity, progress on water and sanitation at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda shows that water-related goals and targets are alarmingly off-track.

In 2022, 2.2 billion people lacked safely managed drinking water and 3.5 billion people lacked safely managed sanitation. Billions of people will lack access to these basic services in 2030 unless progress quadruples. Demand for water is rising owing to rapid population growth, urbanization and increasing water needs from agriculture, industry, and energy sectors. All this is more aggravated due to climate change which is primarily a water crisis and impacts the basic right to water and sanitation due to worsening floods, rising sea levels, shrinking ice fields, wildfires and droughts. Extreme weather events are making water scarcer, more unpredictable and more polluted. These impacts throughout the water cycle threaten sustainable development, biodiversity, and people's access to water and sanitation.

Due to lack of access to toilets millions of people suffered the indignity of open defecation in India also resulting in unsanitary conditions eventually leading to bad health and high cost of medical expense. Women and girls had to fetch water from long distances. As an NGO working in development sector we see firsthand the burden and limitations the water crisis inflicts on women and girls, and the profound impact that access to water and sanitation has in changing their lives, creating opportunity for work, education and bright futures.

India has made commendable progress in the field of sanitation and water since the launch of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) and the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) programmes currently, 62% of households in rural India have tap water connections, 40% rural households have declared themselves Open Defecation Free Plus. At the time of the launch of the Mission in August 2019, only 16.65% had access to tap water.

Since inception India Water Foundation has been vocal about investments in gender-sensitive infrastructure and services should be prioritized and adequate funding for water and sanitation initiatives should prioritize the needs of women and girls in all their diversity, recognizing their specific challenges and vulnerabilities. This should include the provision of gender-segregated sanitation facilities, ensuring their safety, privacy, and dignity. Moreover, access to water should be integrated into broader development plans, such as those addressing health, education, and economic empowerment targets. Similarly as sector partners of the ministry for the implementation of JJM to ensure long-term sustainability of the schemes community participation has been at the heart of planning, implementation, operations, and maintenance. Village Water & Sanitation Committees, have been formed in the country, and Village Action Plans have been prepared, including plans for drinking water source augmentation, greywater treatment and its reuse, and regular O&M of in-village water supply systems. To create awareness about water quality, more than 21 lakh women have been trained in rural areas for testing water samples using Field Test Kits (FTKs) by organizations like India Water Foundation.

As per WHO studies early 30% infant deaths are reduced because of safe water made available to families for drinking. Diarrhea is a very common ailment especially among newborn children. The newborns are more susceptible to water ailments. 1 in every 4 deaths, 1.36 lakh under five deaths per annum in India pertaining to children below 5 years, can be prevented in India with provision of safe water and diarrhoeal disease are estimated to be averted, resulting in estimated cost saving of USD 101 billion.

I think countries in the region who are regressing in SDG6 should emulate this model and must ensure safely managed water and sanitation facilities as public goods with dedicated public funds. Rights-based approaches and gender responsive principles must guide the design; implementation and monitoring of the accelerated work to advance access to safely managed water and sanitation facilities for all. Development and humanitarian programmes across the world must improve access to menstrual materials and facilities. Education for adolescent girls, women, transgender and non-binary individuals on how to manage their menstruation safely, hygienically and with dignity is needed. Mobilize the funding required for the action required at the high scale needed to break the taboos and end the stigma surrounding menstruation. Ultimately, each and every one of us needs to take responsibility for the future we want and advocate for it within our own spheres of influence, inspiring others to act. A poly-centric governance system is emerging where action is no longer top-down nor bottom-up, but both need to co-exist and advance together, across boundaries and borders.

We appreciate the efforts made thus far to address water and sanitation challenges through SDG 6. However, we must go further to ensure that these efforts prioritize and reflect the needs, rights, and voices of women and girls, leaving no one behind.

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