

GFoD | COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT

Water justice for all

Advocacy policy briefs for the
2026 UN Water Conference

Ending work and descent based exclusion in water
sanitation and climate resilience



ERGO
NETWORK

 Asia Dalit Rights Forum



Six thematic policy briefs and a focus on women water and dignity

About this booklet

Water justice starts with recognizing structural exclusion

This advocacy package brings together six thematic policy briefs and a dedicated focus on women, water and dignity. It calls on Member States at the 2026 UN Water Conference to recognize and address the structural barriers faced by communities discriminated on work and descent.

Understanding discrimination based on work and descent

Discrimination based on work and descent (DWD) refers to systems in which a person's social status, opportunities, and treatment are determined by the caste, descent, inherited occupation, or community into which they are born. These systems create entrenched patterns of exclusion that affect where communities live, which services reach them, who controls shared resources, and which occupations they are expected or compelled to perform. For millions globally, DWD directly shapes access to water, sanitation, climate resilience, participation, and public investment.

Communities represented in this booklet

Communities include Dalits, Roma, Quilombola, Haratine, Osu and other groups affected by inherited status and occupational exclusion. Women and girls face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

THE SCALE OF EXCLUSION

Over 330 million people globally experience work- and descent-based discrimination.

Abbreviations

CDWD — Communities discriminated on work and descent

DWD — Discrimination based on work and descent

WASH — Water sanitation and hygiene

SDG — Sustainable Development Goal

IFIs — International financial institutions

Policy themes

An advocacy agenda for dignity equity and meaningful participation

01 Water for People

Ending Exclusion, Segregation and Stigma in Access to Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

02 Water for Prosperity

Dignity, Decent Work and Ending Hazardous Sanitation Work

03 Water for Planet

Climate and Environmental Risks for Marginalized and Segregated Settlements

04 Water for Cooperation

Participation of CDWD Communities in Water Governance

05 Water in Multilateral Processes

Integrating CDWD into Global Water Governance and SDG 6 Monitoring

06 Investments for Water

Equitable Financing for Historically Excluded Communities

07 Women water and dignity

The intersecting impacts of gender and descent based discrimination

How to use the briefs

Each brief sets out its purpose, context, evidence and implications for SDG 6, followed by requests to Member States and policy recommendations. The shared definition of DWD appears in the opening section. References from the source document are collected at the end.

Water for People

Ending Exclusion, Segregation and Stigma in Access to Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

PURPOSE

To elevate visibility on the need to recognize discrimination based on work and descent (DWD) as a structural barrier to universal access to water and sanitation, and to encourage Member States to raise this in national statements at the 2026 UN Water Conference.

Context

The principle of “leaving no one behind” cannot be achieved through national averages alone. Millions of people continue to face exclusion from water and sanitation services because of caste, descent, inherited status, or occupation. These forms of discrimination shape where communities live, how services reach them, and whether they can access water and sanitation safely and with dignity. They also determine whether communities are consulted in water governance and whether public investment is directed toward their settlements.

CDWD communities — including Dalits, Roma, Quilombola, Haratine, Osu and others — experience water inequality not only due to infrastructure gaps, but because of deeply embedded systems of social exclusion.

Key Evidence from CDWD Communities

- Over 330 million people globally experience work- and descent-based discrimination.
- In South Asia, caste-based segregation determines who can use shared water sources, where water points are located, and whether sanitation facilities are safe and accessible.
- In Europe, Roma communities living in segregated settlements face unequal access to drinking water, sanitation, waste collection and municipal services.
- In Africa, descent-based discrimination affects land rights, settlement patterns, and access to public services, including water.
- In Latin America, Quilombola communities face water insecurity linked to territorial exclusion and insecure land rights.
- CDWD women and girls face disproportionate burdens: long-distance water collection, safety risks, unpaid care work, menstrual hygiene challenges, and gender-based violence.

Why This Matters for SDG 6

Universal access requires more than infrastructure. It requires dismantling the systems of discrimination that determine:

- Who can access water
- Who controls shared sources
- Who performs sanitation work
- Who participates in decision-making
- Who benefits from investment

Without addressing discrimination, SDG 6 targets will remain out of reach for millions.

Water for People

Requests to Member States and policy recommendations

OUR REQUEST TO MEMBER STATES

Recognize that discrimination based on caste, descent, inherited status and occupation continues to shape access to water and sanitation.

Affirm that universal access requires identifying and reaching communities historically excluded from WASH services.

Express commitment or support to ensuring that water and sanitation systems are safe, accessible and free from discrimination.

Affirm that water justice requires dignity, equality and meaningful participation for all communities.

Policy Recommendations

1. Identify and prioritize excluded settlements

Governments, UN agencies, international financial institutions (IFIs) — including the World Bank, African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank — and major WASH funders should identify historically excluded and segregated settlements and ensure they are prioritized in water and sanitation investments.

2. Ensure safe, stigma-free access to shared water sources

Water points must be located within CDWD settlements and protected from discriminatory practices.

3. Strengthen disaggregated data

CDWD communities must be included in the design, location, and development of water and sanitation infrastructure projects, ensuring that water points, sanitation facilities, and service routes are accessible, safe, and free from discriminatory practices.

4. Ensure meaningful participation from inception

CDWD representatives must participate from the earliest stages of project design and planning, not only in monitoring or implementation. Participation should be built into governance structures, decision-making bodies, and accountability mechanisms.

5. Address gendered impacts

Policies must address the specific risks faced by CDWD women and girls, including safety, unpaid care work, menstrual hygiene, and violence.

Water for Prosperity

Dignity, Decent Work and Ending Hazardous Sanitation Work

PURPOSE

To underscore that hazardous sanitation work is not accidental but structurally linked to descent-based discrimination, where sanitation workers are overwhelmingly drawn from communities such as Dalits, Osu, Haratine and others labeled as “polluted” because of inherited status and occupation — and to encourage Member States to explicitly reference this reality in their national statements.

Context

Many from CDWD communities remain trapped in hazardous, stigmatized and poorly paid occupations due to inherited social status. These occupations include:

- Manual cleaning of sewers, septic tanks and drains
- Waste collection without protective equipment
- High-risk sanitation work linked to caste or descent

Despite legal prohibitions, hazardous sanitation work persists across regions.

Key Evidence from CDWD Communities

- In South Asia, Dalit communities remain disproportionately represented in sanitation work, often without safety equipment or legal protection.
- In Africa, descent-based occupational hierarchies push communities into stigmatized sanitation roles.
- In Latin America, Quilombola communities face occupational exclusion linked to territorial discrimination.
- Women sanitation workers face intersecting risks: caste/descent discrimination, gender-based violence, climate vulnerability, and occupational exploitation.

Why This Matters for SDG 6

Sanitation workers are essential to achieving SDG 6. Yet their exclusion, exploitation and hazardous working conditions undermine:

- Public health
- Service delivery
- Dignity and safety
- Climate resilience
- Gender equality

Ending hazardous sanitation work is central to achieving “Water for Prosperity.”

Water for Prosperity

Requests to Member States and policy recommendations

OUR REQUEST TO MEMBER STATES

Express commitment to ending hazardous sanitation work and ensuring dignity, safety and decent work for sanitation workers.

Recognize sanitation workers as essential public-service workers and rights-holders.

Express support to safe technologies and just transitions for communities historically pushed into sanitation work.

Policy Recommendations

1. Eliminate hazardous sanitation work

Adopt safe technologies, mechanization, and enforce legal prohibitions.

2. Ensure decent work and social protection

Provide protective equipment, fair wages, health insurance, and occupational safety.

3. Establish transition pathways

Support workers trapped in caste-linked occupations to transition into safe, dignified work.

4. Recognize sanitation workers as rights-holders

Ensure representation in WASH workforce planning and decision-making.

5. Address gendered occupational risks

Protect women sanitation workers from violence, exploitation and climate-related vulnerability.

Water for Planet

Climate and Environmental Risks for Marginalized and Segregated Settlements

PURPOSE

To affirm the urgency to integrate CDWD communities into climate-resilient water planning and to encourage Member States to include explicit references to CDWD in climate-water statements.

Context

CDWD communities are often segregated because discriminatory norms label them as “polluted,” “unclean,” or socially inferior due to the work they perform or the status they inherit. As a result, they are frequently forced to live in environmentally hazardous areas — near waste dumps, open sewers, drainage channels, contaminated water bodies, or flood-prone informal settlements. This segregation is not accidental; it is the product of inherited social hierarchies that determine land access, settlement patterns, and public service delivery. Climate change intensifies these vulnerabilities, making exclusion a structural water-governance issue.

Key Evidence from CDWD Communities

- CDWD communities frequently live in areas with poor infrastructure, insecure tenure, and limited climate resilience.
- Climate impacts deepen existing inequalities in access to water and sanitation.
- Women and girls face heightened risks during climate-related water scarcity, including violence and health impacts.
- In South Asia, Dalit settlements often lack climate-resilient infrastructure.
- In Africa, descent-based discrimination affects land rights and climate vulnerability.
- In Latin America, Quilombola communities face climate risks linked to territorial exclusion.

Why This Matters for SDG 6

Climate resilience requires addressing the social systems that determine:

- Who is most exposed
- Who receives adaptation investment
- Who participates in planning
- Who controls water resources

Without integrating CDWD communities, climate-resilient water planning will reinforce existing inequalities.

Water for Planet

Requests to Member States and policy recommendations

OUR REQUEST TO MEMBER STATES

Express commitment to ensuring that climate-resilient water planning reaches communities historically excluded from public services.”

Express recognition that climate vulnerability is shaped by social discrimination, including caste and descent.

Promote integration of CDWD communities into climate adaptation and resilience strategies.

Policy Recommendations

1. Map climate-vulnerable CDWD settlements

Identify excluded communities in climate-risk assessments.

2. Prioritize climate-resilient WASH infrastructure

Ensure investments reach segregated and marginalized settlements.

3. Include CDWD representatives in climate-water planning

Ensure meaningful participation in adaptation and resilience processes.

4. Address gendered climate impacts

Protect women and girls from climate-related water insecurity.

5. Strengthen territorial rights

Support land and housing rights for communities facing climate vulnerability.

Water for Cooperation

Participation of CDWD Communities in Water Governance

PURPOSE

To advance and ensure meaningful participation of CDWD communities in water governance at all levels.

Context

Water cooperation requires inclusive governance. CDWD communities are often excluded from:

- Water user committees
- Basin-level mechanisms
- Municipal planning
- National water governance
- Transboundary water cooperation

Key Evidence from CDWD Communities

- CDWD communities rarely participate in water governance structures.
- Exclusion from decision-making perpetuates unequal access and poor service delivery.
- Participation improves accountability, equity and sustainability.
- In South Asia, caste-based exclusion limits participation in water user committees.
- In Africa, descent-based discrimination affects representation in public institutions.
- In Europe and Latin America, Roma and Quilombola communities face exclusion from municipal planning.

Why This Matters for SDG 6

Inclusive governance is essential for:

- Equitable access
- Sustainable management
- Conflict prevention
- Accountability
- Climate resilience

Water for Cooperation

Requests to Member States and policy recommendations

OUR REQUEST TO MEMBER STATES

Express support and commitment to ensuring meaningful participation of communities discriminated against in work and descent in water governance.”

Promote recognition of CDWD communities as rights-holders, knowledge-holders and decision-makers.

Promote and support strengthening inclusive water governance at local, national and transboundary levels.

Policy Recommendations

1. Include CDWD representatives in governance bodies

Ensure representation in water user committees, basin authorities, and municipal planning from inception.

2. Ensure participation in WASH planning and monitoring

Include CDWD communities in accountability mechanisms and project design.

3. Support community-led water monitoring

Recognize community-generated evidence as legitimate data.

4. Build mechanisms for CDWD engagement in transboundary cooperation

Ensure inclusion in regional water dialogues.

5. Strengthen youth and women leadership

Support leadership development for CDWD women and youth.

Water in Multilateral Processes

Integrating CDWD into Global Water Governance and SDG 6 Monitoring

PURPOSE

To promote and encourage Member States to reflect CDWD in global water governance reforms and SDG 6 monitoring.

Context

Global water governance is evolving following the 2023 UN Water Conference. The 2026 Conference is a key moment to:

- Strengthen monitoring
- Improve accountability
- Integrate equity
- Support the Special Envoy for Water
- Advance the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation

CDWD communities must be visible in these processes.

Key Evidence from CDWD Communities

- CDWD populations remain invisible in national and global datasets.
- Lack of disaggregated data hides inequalities behind national averages.
- Exclusion undermines global progress on SDG 6.
- Community-generated evidence reveals forms of exclusion not captured in official data.

Why This Matters for SDG 6

Monitoring must capture:

- Who is excluded
- Who benefits
- Who participates
- Who performs sanitation work
- Who faces climate vulnerability

Water in Multilateral Processes

Requests to Member States and policy recommendations

OUR REQUEST TO MEMBER STATES

Call for the integration of descent-based discrimination into global water governance and SDG 6 monitoring.

Support strengthening disaggregated data to make CDWD communities visible.

Promote and encourage commitment to ensuring CDWD participation in multilateral water processes.

Policy Recommendations

1. Integrate CDWD into global monitoring frameworks

Include CDWD-sensitive indicators in SDG 6 reporting.

2. Engage CDWD communities in consultations

Ensure participation in processes led by the Special Envoy for Water.

3. Strengthen disaggregated WASH data

Include caste, descent, occupation, location and other relevant indicators.

4. Support community-generated evidence

Recognize participatory research and testimonies as legitimate data.

5. Ensure CDWD representation in multilateral spaces

Include CDWD voices in global water governance discussions.

Investments for Water

Equitable Financing for Historically Excluded Communities

PURPOSE

To encourage Member States in directing, monitoring and tracking water investments toward CDWD communities.

Context

Water investments often bypass segregated or informal settlements. CDWD communities face structural barriers to benefiting from public investment, including:

- Residential segregation
- Insecure tenure
- Lack of recognition in official data
- Exclusion from planning
- Discriminatory service provision

Key Evidence from CDWD Communities

- Major water investments often bypass excluded communities.
- CDWD settlements frequently lack basic infrastructure.
- Lack of data prevents targeted investment.
- Community monitoring reveals gaps in service delivery.

Why This Matters for SDG 6

Equitable investment is essential for:

- Universal access
- Climate resilience
- Gender equality
- Decent work
- Territorial justice

Investments for Water

Requests to Member States and policy recommendations

OUR REQUEST TO MEMBER STATES

Call for commitment to directing water investments toward communities historically excluded from WASH services.

Support equity-based financing criteria that identify and prioritize CDWD communities.

Promote and encourage tracking whether investments reach marginalized settlements.

Policy Recommendations

1. Identify excluded communities

Map segregated and historically excluded settlements.

2. Track investment flows

Ensure budgets reach CDWD communities.

3. Require equity in financing criteria

Include non-discrimination and inclusion in donor and government investment frameworks.

4. Support community monitoring

Enable communities to track investment outcomes.

5. Link investment equity to climate resilience

Prioritize climate-vulnerable CDWD settlements.

Women water and dignity

Voices from communities discriminated on work and descent

Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) are socially stratified groups that endure systemic, inherited, and intergenerational forms of exclusion and marginalization rooted in ancestral occupational roles and caste-like hierarchies. [1] These forms of discrimination are often legitimized and perpetuated through cultural, religious, and institutional norms, resulting in restricted access to fundamental rights and services, including education, healthcare, political participation, and legal protection. [2] CDWD are present across various global contexts, including Dalits and Burakumin in South Asia, Roma in Europe, Haratines, Osu and other descent-based communities in Africa, and Quilombola and Palenque communities in Latin America. Women and girls in these communities experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and their situation requires dedicated attention and targeted legislative and policy interventions.

Intersection of Gender and Descent-Based Discrimination

As the Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination highlighted: “Women and girls from descent-based communities experience discrimination and human rights abuse on multiple grounds based on their gender and descent. The intergenerational nature of descent-based discrimination often condemns women to a lifetime of exclusion, marginalization and disadvantage in every sphere of life. Descent-based discrimination is also used as a social mechanism to maintain their subordinate position imposed in society. When gender and descent intersect, they compound the discrimination faced by this group.

These violations include, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced prostitution and other forms of gender-based violence, bonded and forced labour, discrimination in political, economic, cultural, and social life, and a lack of or limited access to food, water and sanitation, healthcare, education, and adequate housing. Women and girls from descent-based communities are also particularly vulnerable to reprisal attacks when they seek justice for crimes committed. Those who are refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless or internally displaced face additional barriers to accessing their rights, and who live in urban, camp, or remote rural settings, may experience further barriers in being guaranteed their rights.” [3]

Gendered Water Inequality and Stigma

Women and girls affected by work- and descent-based discrimination, experience stigma linked to perceptions that their identity, work, or social origin is “impure,” leading to segregation and exclusion from shared public spaces, including access to water, sanitation, education, healthcare, and other essential services. For Roma women, this stigma is compounded by antigypsyism and related structural discrimination.

Climate Change and Gendered Water Insecurity

Climate change has a deleterious impact on CDWD women, who face natural disasters, such as landslides and flooding, and often lack the conditions required to increase their climate resilience. Climate change results in the loss of ecosystems, community habitats, livelihoods and ancestral knowledge, and disrupted food and water supplies. [4]

Women water and dignity

The realities of unequal water access across regions

Regional Evidence

Europe: Roma Women

Recent evidence confirms that Roma communities continue to experience significant inequalities in access to water and sanitation across Europe. The 2024 FRA Roma Survey, published in 2025, found that:

- 17% of Roma and Travellers across the 13 countries surveyed lived without tap water inside their accommodation (vs 2% of the general population).
- In North Macedonia, 14% of Roma/Travellers lacked indoor tap water (vs 2% of the general population).
- 47% of Roma and Travellers lived in housing affected by dampness, darkness or inadequate sanitation. [5]

These inequalities have particular implications for Roma women and girls. Where water is not available within the home, women and girls frequently bear a disproportionate responsibility for collecting and managing household water. This increases unpaid care work, reduces time available for education and employment, and exposes women and girls to safety and dignity risks when water or sanitation facilities are located outside the home. The 2024 UNICEF analysis of Roma children and women in North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo found that Roma settlements consistently had lower access to drinking water when needed than the respective national populations. [6]

Latin America: Quilombola Women

Access to safe and adequate water remains a major inequality affecting Quilombola communities in Brazil. The 2022 Brazilian Census (IBGE) shows that

- Only 66.7% of Quilombola households in officially delimited territories piped water (vs 95.14% of Brazil overall).
- 18.21% of Quilombola residents in delimited territories had no piped water at all.

Nationally, the Brazilian National Water and Basic Sanitation Agency (ANA) reported in 2026 that 4.69 million women live in households without piped water.

For Quilombola women, these structural inequalities intersect with racial discrimination, territorial marginalisation and inadequate infrastructure. Research focusing specifically on women in a Quilombola community in northeastern Brazil found that households often had to rely on alternative sources such as wells, springs and cisterns because of failures in the water supply, and documented concerns about the contamination of some local water sources. Where water is not available inside the home, women and girls can bear a disproportionate share of the unpaid work associated with collecting, transporting, storing and managing water, while inadequate water and sanitation can also affect health, hygiene, care responsibilities, safety, education and women's ability to participate fully in economic, social and public life.

Women water and dignity

South Asia and Africa

South Asia: Dalit Women

For Dalit communities, access to water has historically been shaped not only by poverty or inadequate infrastructure, but also by caste-based notions of purity and pollution. Dalits have been denied or restricted from using wells, hand pumps, tanks and other public water sources because their physical contact was considered to “pollute” the water. Fetching and managing household water is frequently assigned to women. Caste-based restrictions translated directly into women's unpaid labour, loss of time, exposure to harassment and risks to their safety and dignity. Research documents discrimination, verbal abuse, physical violence and other forms of harassment experienced by Dalit women while collecting water. [7]

Dalit women may be required to wait until dominant-caste users have finished collecting water, stand in separate queues, use particular times or locations, or depend on someone from a dominant caste to pour water into their containers without allowing them to touch the source themselves.

Africa: Osu, Oru, Haratine and Others

Communities affected by work- and descent-based discrimination in Africa — including Osu, Oru, Haratine and others — face segregation, exclusion from public services, and gendered vulnerabilities linked to inherited status, territorial marginalization, and climate impacts. Women in these communities often bear the burden of water collection under unsafe or discriminatory conditions.

Women water and dignity

Gender must be central to SDG 6 and the Water Conference

Water justice cannot be achieved without addressing:

- gender-based violence linked to water access
- unpaid care work
- menstrual hygiene
- safety and dignity risks
- exclusion from water governance
- occupational exploitation (e.g., sanitation work)
- climate vulnerability

Women from CDWD communities must be recognized as:

- rights-holders
- leaders
- knowledge-holders
- essential participants in water governance

OUR REQUEST TO MEMBER STATES

Recognize gender and descent as intersecting barriers to water and sanitation

Include CDWD women and girls explicitly in national statements

Strengthen disaggregated data (gender × descent × location × occupation)

Prioritize excluded settlements where women bear disproportionate water burdens

Ensure safe, stigma-free access to water and sanitation

Protect women sanitation workers from hazardous work

Include CDWD women in water governance from inception

Integrate gendered climate vulnerability into water planning

Support community-generated evidence from women and girls

References

1 Bapuji, H., Chrispal, S., Attri, P. S., Ertug, G., & Soundararajan, V. (2024). An integrative review of management research on caste: Broadening our horizons. *Academy of Management Annals*, 18(2), 506-549.

2 Elias, A., & Paradies, Y. (2021). The costs of institutional racism and its ethical implications for healthcare. *Journal of bioethical inquiry*, 18(1), 45-58.

3 United Nations Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities: Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination, Key Challenges and Strategic Approaches to Combat Caste-Based and Analogous Forms of Discrimination, 2017

4 Ibid. CEDAW/C/BRA/CO/8-9 (Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on Brazil, in 2024)

5 Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European countries – Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024

6 Breaking barriers An analytical report on Roma children and women .pdf

7 Dutta, S., Sinha, I., & Parashar, A. (2018). Dalit Women and Water: Availability, Access and Discrimination in Rural India. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 4(1), 62-79.

Our call to action

Recognize excluded communities and make water justice real

01

Recognize work and descent based discrimination as a structural barrier to water and sanitation.

02

End hazardous sanitation work and ensure dignity safety and decent work for sanitation workers.

03

Ensure climate resilient water planning and adaptation investment reach historically excluded settlements.

04

Include CDWD communities as rights holders and decision makers in water governance from inception.

05

Strengthen disaggregated data and community generated evidence in WASH monitoring and SDG 6 reporting.

06

Direct and track water investments so that excluded communities benefit from equitable financing.

07

Recognize intersecting gender and descent based barriers and include CDWD women and girls in water governance climate planning and investment.

