Currently, it is estimated that 30 percent of people worldwide lack access to safe, readily available water at home. Nearly one billion people still defecate in the open and half a billion women do not have access to menstrual hygiene facilities. While the health impact of poor water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) conditions on children have been well documented, less focus has been paid to its adverse impact on women’s well-being and health. Overall, women’s needs remain invisible in the WASH sector - from its absence in the MDGs and the SDGs, lack of gender disaggregated data on health risks, to design and delivery of WASH services.

In this paper, I highlight the health burden of water and sanitation insecurities for women by proposing a new conceptual framework for understanding WASH related diseases from a gender perspective. Such an approach has not been systematically applied to the WASH sector before. The framework inspired by feminist theories uses two synthetic constructs –“gendered relations in the household” and “gendered presentation of the body” - to identify eight different social-cultural pathways that increase women’s risk of exposure to a variety of infectious and non-infectious diseases related to WASH (such as trachoma, spinal injuries, etc.).

I use the Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) methodology. The CIS method is best suited for studies that draw on large number of papers drawn from diverse fields with the objective of generating a theory. The framework draws on 154 papers from the fields of epidemiology, medicine, and social sciences.

The framework proposed here places women’s bodies at the center of a WASH agenda so that the “H” in WASH is expanded beyond hand hygiene and even monthly menstrual hygiene to include the ability to practice daily bodily & perineal hygiene given the disciplinary practices women’s bodies are subjected to. This requires providing women with direct financial assistance not only for building toilets but also bathrooms (completely neglected in existing WASH policy and program) and for other sanitary material and also reducing taxes on sanitary napkins and tampons.