

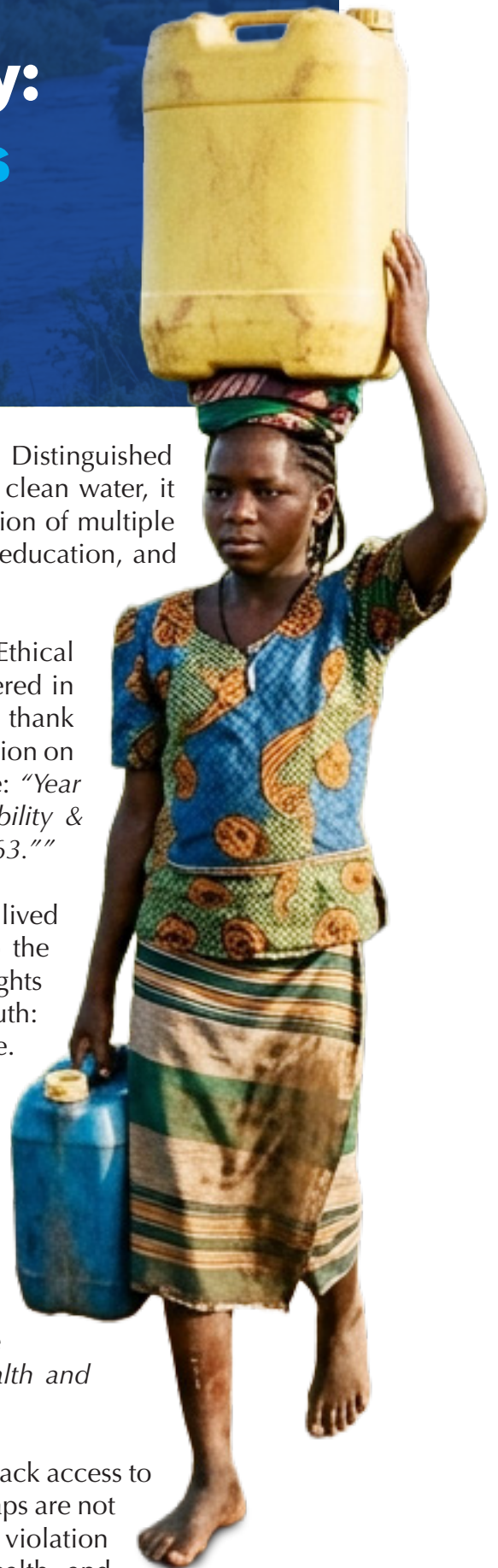
# No Water, No Dignity: Reclaiming Women's Health and Rights in Africa

Honourable Excellencies, Delegates, Commissioners, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, when a girl cannot access clean water, it is never just water she loses—it is the slow but steady erosion of multiple rights: her right to health, reproductive autonomy, dignity, education, and ultimately her right to life, all at once.

I, Elsie Milimu, speaking on behalf of the Kenya Legal and Ethical Issues Network on HIV and AIDS (KELIN), an NGO registered in Kenya mandated to promote and protect the right to health, thank you for the opportunity to address this Honourable Commission on the human rights situation in Africa under this year's theme: *"Year of Water Sustainability: Assuring Sustainable Water Availability & Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063."*

This year's theme, My Excellencies, speaks directly to the lived realities of women and girls across our continent, and to the indivisibility of their rights under the African human rights system. At its core, the theme underscores a critical truth: water security and reproductive health rights are inseparable. The realization of Article 16 of the Banjul Charter and Article 14 of the Maputo Protocol on the right to health and reproductive rights cannot be achieved in isolation. This right is deeply interconnected with Article 4 and 5 of the Banjul Charter as read with Article 15 of the Maputo Protocol on the right to food security and nutrition—including adequate water, and Article 18 on the right to a healthy and sustainable environment. Together, these provisions affirm a simple but powerful truth: Without safe and reliable access to water and sanitation, *women's health and dignity* cannot be realised in practice.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, where hundreds of millions still lack access to safely managed drinking water and basic sanitation, these gaps are not only infrastructure failures—they are systemic barriers and a violation of rights with direct consequences for reproductive health and



survival. Every single day, across our vast continent, adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) face heightened risks of unintended pregnancy, sexual and gender-based violence, and preventable maternal complications. Honourable Chairperson and Commissioners, every preventable death linked to inadequate access to water and sexual and reproductive health services, information, and commodities for adolescent girls and young women is not only a personal violation- but also a tragedy that negatively impacts economic, educational, and sustainable development outcomes towards achievement of Agenda 2063.

Safe childbirth cannot happen without clean water. Yet too many women still give birth in facilities without reliable water for handwashing, infection prevention, or neonatal care. This increases the risk of sepsis, postpartum infections, and newborn complications—turning what should be a moment of life into one of preventable loss. The evidence is clear: sub-Saharan Africa continues to bear the highest global burden of maternal mortality, accounting for approximately 70% of all maternal deaths worldwide, many of which are preventable and linked to weak health systems, including inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in health facilities<sup>1</sup>. Inadequate access to water and sanitation further undermines menstrual hygiene management, forcing many girls to miss school during their menstrual cycles due to lack of safe, private, and dignified facilities. This recurring absence contributes to poor educational outcomes and deepens gender inequality in learning outcomes and life opportunities.

KELIN, together with other human rights organizations and civil society, continues to demand stronger accountability and sustained investment in Africa's WASH and health systems. We respectfully call upon the African Commission to:

- Reaffirm that access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene is an essential enabler of the right to health and reproductive rights under Article 4, 5, 16 and 24 of the Banjul Charter, as read together with Articles 14, 15 and 18 of the Maputo Protocol;
- Urge State Parties to prioritise integrated investments in WASH and SRHR systems, particularly in health facilities, schools, and rural communities;
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms during State reporting to ensure measurable progress on WASH-linked reproductive health outcomes, including maternal health and menstrual hygiene management; and
- Encourage increased domestic financing for both health and water systems, in line with the Abuja Declaration and States' obligations under regional human rights instruments.

Water accessibility and security are therefore not optional development targets—they are indispensable foundations for the realization of the rights to health, education, dignity, life and reproductive autonomy of adolescent girls and young women all over the world. Equitable access to safe water across homes, schools, and health facilities is essential to breaking cycles of inequality, protecting rights, and enabling full participation in society.

Honourable Commissioners, as I conclude, let this truth remain with us: dignity cannot exist without water; reproductive rights cannot be achieved without proper sanitation, and gender equality cannot be realized without both. Water is not only survival—it is reclaiming reproductive justice for women and girls across Africa.

Thank you