The end of 2012 saw the annual 16 days of activism against violence and abuse of South Africa’s most vulnerable – women and children.

A few weeks before the start of the 16 days the media ran a seemingly unusual story, The ACLU or American Civil Liberties Union had begun an effort to get the US Army to revisit its policy that currently prevents women from serving in frontline combat zones. While the argument for complete equality is well understood, on the surface it may reflect a well-meaning military establishment that seeks to shield what it considers to be its more vulnerable half. On digging a little deeper, further facts emerge. A primary criterion for promotion in the US military appears to be combat experience. It would appear that the ACLU’s case is in fact against a systemic gender discrimination that results in direct disadvantage for women members of the US Army that prevents the further gender diversification of the Army’s hierarchy.

What this illustrates is that gender-based violence and abuse, as appalling as the statistics are, remains only the tip of the iceberg. The key question is this – do we have gender biased systemic fault-lines in our own system? If they exist, where do they express themselves? And of course, in the water sector, how should we deal with them?

An understanding of the wedge is imperative in empowering a systemic response to reverse its impact. In the water domain the impact of gender imbalances are found throughout the system and in all circumstances. However, as with most other discrimination, it is most pronounced in domains of scarcity and hardship. This is therefore a prominent feature in the developing world as a whole and Africa in particular. UNEP estimates that some 400 million Africans live in water scarce countries and 300 million Africans do not have reasonable safe access to water by any international standard.

UNIFEM (UN Women), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, claims that women and children around the world spend some 200 million hours a day collecting some 20 kg of water per trip. In South Africa alone women walk the equivalent of the journey to the moon and back 16 times every day to collect water. Water.org claims that, world wide, women spend some 200 million hours a day collecting water. The opportunity cost of this is very high. UNIFEM estimates that in India the estimated loss of potential income is 150 million work days a year for women which equates to R1.67 billion.

The WRC in its new five-year strategic plan prioritises Gender and Water and the work-plan is developed in four dimensions (Fig. 2).

The international dialogue that was launched on the African continent under the auspices of AMCOW (African Ministers Council on Water) in 2008 resulted in Water & Environmental Minister Edna Molewa’s launch of the Policy and Strategy for Mainstreaming Gender in Africa’s Water Sector in 2011. Earlier this year at Rio+20 this was followed up with an international dialogue on Gender and Water, led by Deputy Minister of Water & Environmental Affairs, Rejoice Mabudhafasi, at the UN Conference.

**Figure 1**

The Wedge of Gender discrimination travels through the trajectories of broader cultural and historical societal biases that impact on deepening the levels of gender imbalances in economic participation of women. These in turn have a tautonomic relationship with household hierarchies that usually result in embedding subservient roles and limited education for the girl-child. All of these, in various ways find expression in gender-based violence and abuse.
The third leg on that journey was the Gender Session at the International Freshwater Governance Conference in November 2012. The lead speaker and renowned academic, Prof Ali Mazrui, reminded us of the traditional role of women as custodians of water in African cultural history. All of these endeavours will culminate in a WRC-partnered international consortium comprising the DWA, the GWP, IWMI and various other players hosting a Gender and Water Summit for Africa in 2013.

The end point of this multi-year journey is to achieve the aspiration that the current Head of UN Women and former President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, expressed so succinctly: “Gender equality must become a lived reality.”