

Gender participation in wash in community projects

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Short Communication

Gender simply refers to the specific roles and responsibilities adopted by women and men in any society. It is related to our socially ascribed roles because of the way society is organized not because of our biological differences. The gender roles ascribe to men and women change from place to place and varies from place to place. The parameters of gender inequality in Nigeria, including Jos, Plateau State mapped out in numerous studies and reports demonstrate a clear link between inequality and poverty.

The success of achieving the MDG goal 3 and now SDGs goal 5 on gender and SDGs goal 6 to ensure availability of water and sanitation for all (Wash) is measured by the proportions of both rural and urban populations, men and women who have sustainable access to improved water and sanitation.

Looking at the gender division in numbers one learns that:

- I. All of 2/3 of the world's work is done by women.
- II. Only 1/10 of the world's income is controlled by women.
- III. Practically 2/3 of the world's illiterates are women.
- IV. A paltry 1/100 of the world's property is owned by women GWA, (2010).

Situational analysis

Findings from the RGA conducted by Ezeji¹ for GWA (2005) in Jos, Plateau State discovered that women are the ones who are most affected by lack of access to safe water and sanitation facilities which gave birth to the African WAC II project. The impact is mostly felt by women, when others fall sick through contaminated drinking water sources; they spend productive man-hours caring for sick ones.

Equally this study showed that intestinal illness affects children who are prone to stomach pain, diarrhea, dehydration which has led to deaths due to the contaminated water they drink. About 50% of children in the community under age 5 die every year from effects of drinking water. While 30% of the people including women are without access to sanitation and 80% of illness detected in the community originated from their water sources.²

Gender and empowerment

Therefore a key strategy in addressing gender imbalances is **empowerment**. It must be realized, though, that groups and individuals empower themselves. It is a process of change one goes through from within. Instruments for change include legislation, education, laws and regulations as well as policies.

Gender mainstreaming in the project cycle

Employing the gender approach, this implies that attitudes, roles and responsibilities of men and women are taken into account. That is, both sexes do not necessarily have the same access to, control over, resources and that work benefits and impacts may be different for both groups. This approach requires an open mindedness and aims at the fullest possible participation of both women and men.

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Gender and wash projects

Country officers supporting national programs, project offices, gender experts, Water supply and sanitation reform programme EU and those interested in gender within project implementation can use the generic project cycle. It is important for the project to be clear on the objectives in relation to gender and equity issues. Most importantly, there is evidence to show that water and sanitation services are generally more effective if women take an active role in the various stages involved in setting them up, from design and planning, through to the ongoing operations and maintenance procedures required to make any initiative sustainable. As well as dealing with these technical and practical issues, women have an important role in educating their families and the community about hygienic practices.

Again, evidence suggests that their involvement makes these ventures more likely to succeed. There is sometimes opposition to positioning gender concerns at the centre of wash initiatives, even when this comes as a response to a directive to include a majority or quota of women in decision-making. This opposition is usually because women are seen to be stepping outside their traditional, non-public roles into public and technical areas for which they are perceived to be unqualified and unsuited.

Among the shortcomings in development programmes and community projects is that issues of gender, poverty and environment are often included solely as an afterthought. If gender issues are addressed at project conception, they can more easily be incorporated in the design, implementation and evaluation. Programmes that do not take into consideration the differing needs of the rich and poor and men and women during all its phases run the risk of being ineffective, inefficient and unsustainable.

However, women can and do make a contribution to water and sanitation services and do have a right as human beings to participate in issues that affect their lives and those of their families. Women bear the main responsibility for keeping their households supplied with water, caring for the sick, maintaining a hygienic domestic environment and bringing up healthy children. It is the women who are most likely to know what is required and where. Getting these important details right means better services and quality of life for all in the rural and urban areas.

A World Bank evaluation of 122 water projects found that the effectiveness of a project was six to seven times higher where women were involved than where they were not.

Generic project cycle

The planning stage

The results of involving women in the design and planning stages are multiple, from reducing corruption, increasing management transparency, better financial management and empowering both women and men for example in Indonesia and Malawi, women overcame deeply entrenched prejudices about their lack of technical understanding, by showing that, as primary users of water, they were the most qualified to comment on an appropriate design for a water system. What is seen to be new territory for women was quickly scaled up in Indonesia and the benefits extended to others.

Funding

According to the UN Interagency Task Force on Gender and Water, women have been found to be the most effective managers in several UN water projects in Africa, where water has been used for income generation and where women have control over income earned from their small scale enterprises. Women's cooperatives connected to water points in Mauritania, for example, have become very dynamic and women take a more active and prominent role through capacity building and provision of credit. For example, women in COWAN/ UNHABIT project have a tradition of saving small amounts of money each month for important purposes. Such traditional sources of investment can be used for water and sanitation facilities if supplemented by seed money from NGOs or other sources. The funding was used to provide female headed households with toilets in an urban slum area in Tundu Wada Jos.

Operation and maintenance

In many projects women have taken a key role in the smooth running of water supply and sanitation schemes, including an active role in maintenance and ongoing repairs.

The concept of India's first sanitized slum in Tiruchirappalli has been extended to seven other areas. This has been an initiative with the Gramalaya NGO that aims to provide slum communities with safe drinking water through hand pumps and through the construction of community and household and child-friendly toilets. The programme works with CBOs such as women's self help groups, raising awareness of the need to use and maintain toilets properly. The fact that women in the Sanitation and Hygiene Education group are responsible for maintenance and repairs have meant that open defecation has been completely eradicated in the area. More recently the hygiene promoters in Riyom and Shedam, EU projects try to be inclusive and mainstream gender in all aspects of their projects.

Awareness-raising

A key component of any WASH project is to raise awareness about the importance of carrying out safe hygienic practices. Women play a vital role in awareness raising about these issues, as they take the main responsibility for domestic duties and for developing safe and hygienic habits in children. Women also cope with the additional burden of caring for household members who become sick as a result of unsafe water and poor sanitation. In addition, Hygiene and Sanitation Education programmes provide support for female facilitators to inform the community on water borne diseases and their prevention.³⁻¹³

Summary points

Putting gender concerns at the centre of WASH improvements leads to better service provision through:

- I. Better technical design and planning, based on key stakeholder consultation.
- II. Management accountability and transparency in all aspects.
- III. Sustainable, safe water and sanitation services.
- IV. Responsibility for efficient generation and administration of funds.
- V. Value for money schemes.
- VI. Scaling-up of benefits to other areas by empowering women and other women's groups by example to replicate benefits of sanitation such as better and healthy productive lives.
- VII. More efficient awareness-raising about hygienic practices
- VIII. Better maintaining and repairing of components to ensure the smooth running of the micro credit revolving scheme.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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