



Can rural women manage water?

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THE ADOPTION OF the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade has awakened consciousness in developing countries including Ghana on the need to focus attention on improving water and sanitation facilities. In Ghana, this awareness has facilitated the implementation of many rural water delivery programmes. In recognition of the significance of water to women, they are actively being encouraged to play key roles in the sector, particularly at the community (rural) level.

In the Ghanaian traditional society, it is a woman's responsibility to identify water sources, fetch, store and dispose of water. In communities experiencing acute shortage of water, women spend considerable time and effort searching for water. Findings from a District in Ghana indicate that:

"Before the introduction of potable water in the Bolgatanga District, about 96% of women were known to be fetching water each day of their lives, spending 30 minutes to 6 hours and walking an average of 3.8 miles in search of water" (USAID, 1984).

The objective of this paper is to discuss the role which women are playing in the management of water facilities at the community level in Ghana and highlight the challenges and constraints which tend to impede their efforts.

It would be argued by the authors of the paper that caution must be exercised in involving women actively in the management of water facilities since the patriarchal system in the Ghanaian socio-cultural setting is not conducive.

It would be further argued that notwithstanding the socio-cultural limitations, women have the potential to be managers of community water facilities.

Women's involvement

Women's involvement in the management of rural water facilities in Ghana is manifested in their membership of water and sanitation (WATSAN) committees and as pump caretakers. As members of the WATSAN committees, women are expected to be involved in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of water programmes. For newly initiated water programmes, women members participate in resource mobilization activities to ensure the generation of adequate funds to meet the communities' contribution to capital costs of the water facility being provided. In the case of existing community water programmes, women WATSAN committee members either collect water user fees from residents or sell water at point sources and render accounts

regularly. Given the trust reposed in women for their level of honesty, women have been elected as treasurers of most of the WATSAN committees. As community pump caretakers for sophisticated pumps such as the Ghana Modified Indian Mark II, women ensure pump site cleanliness, carry out routine inspection, repair and maintenance of the above ground components of the pump, liaise with area mechanics and keep proper records on the repair and maintenance of the pump. In the Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana, women caretakers have been trained to undertake below ground repairs on the Afridev pump which is considered less sophisticated.

Challenges to women's involvement

A combination of socio-cultural, psychological and economic factors pose challenges to women's involvement in the management of water facilities. These factors are discussed in the following sections of the paper.

Socio-cultural

Traditionally, women are responsible for all domestic chores i.e. cooking, feeding of children, washing, fetching fire wood, bathing children etc. (Melchoir-Tellier, 1981). Given this traditional role set for women, problems usually arise when women have to leave home either for short or long durations attending meetings and training workshops on water and sanitation. In a few cases, women WATSAN committee members have been physically prevented by their husbands from participating in workshops on the grounds that nobody would perform the woman's role when she is away from home. The intervention of Project Management and the District authorities have contributed to allaying the fears of husbands on the participation of their wives in meeting and training workshops.

Given the domination of men in the society arising out of the patriarchal system, the involvement of women in the management of water facilities is an issue in the community and its managers tend to enjoy some visibility and where they are women, the male non-WATSAN committee members feel marginalised in the development of their communities.

Psychological

In some societies in Ghana, women are considered as being inferior to men. This phenomenon is particularly evident in rural communities. Some women particularly the uneducated have readily accepted this position and

do not therefore want to assert themselves by assuming new roles as managers of water facilities. This is because these roles are considered the preserve of men. (Simpson Herbert, 1992). Against this background, women tend to discourage their fellow women from active participation. It can be said that ignorance and illiteracy are perpetuating the inferior status of women and hence their reluctance to play leading roles in the water and sanitation sector.

In a contrasting situation, some women have 'liberated' themselves from male dominance and plunged into active involvement in the management of water facilities. These women are very assertive and tend to override their male counterparts on the committee and other members of the society. This has produced negative feelings and antagonism against these women. In such circumstances, the cooperation and complementary support required from the community is absent.

Economic

Rather than consider active involvement in the management of water facilities as complementary to their working life, most women regard the activity as additional responsibility and therefore shy away from it. In some Ghanaian villages, by the age of 18, most women would have at least one child and therefore have responsibilities towards husbands and children.

Suggestions for improving women's involvement in managing water

A number of proposals are suggested towards promoting rural women's involvement in the management of water facilities. In the first place, implementors of rural water programmes require a great deal of time and effort to convince women that their public role is complementary to their domestic role. Secondly, it must be recognized that women cannot be dealt with in isolation; they should be considered as part of the entire village network. It should, in this connection, be realized that no intervention would be complete without the support of all villagers since participation in development is gender-neutral. This is because working towards a partnership of all community members to promote a sustainable water delivery programme is more realistic than focusing all attention on women. (Asaad et. al, 1994)

A crucial factor to note in this proposal is that communities should be made to realize the important role women in managing water facilities. This recognition would enable the community residents to be more willing to offer the women the needed encouragement in their new roles as managers of water. Thirdly, the introduction of women into formal structures concerning their new roles should be done gradually and cautiously. If it is made suddenly and foisted on the people, the males in the society would kick against the idea and render the women ineffective. If women are pushed into playing new key roles in their communities' water needs, the men can be likened to a baby who's weaned abruptly and left without a foster parent; the psychological imbalances can be disastrous in the society.

Finally, women and the entire society should also be helped to understand their role not only in narrow perspectives such as water projects but in general community development work.

Conclusion

Even though women's participation in the management of rural water facilities is important, it is becoming increasingly clear that a plethora of factors pose barriers to the attainment of this objective. Awareness and sensitization workshops should be organized for both male and female opinion leaders. It is recognized that where only females are sensitized through workshops, the male resistance hardens and the women are not allowed to put into practice the ideas obtained from the workshops.

References

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