



Women and water supply — a partnership

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THE NEEDS, PREFERENCES, organization and willingness to pay of community residents should determine the design, implementation and management of new or improved water supply and sanitation schemes. As women are usually the primary collectors, managers and users of water in the home, and the primary providers of health care to family members, their participation is vital. This paper will draw on the experience of the authors in Ghana, Uganda and Sri Lanka. Wardrop Engineering has recently been engaged in rural water supply and sanitation projects in these countries. The most current and detailed references will be drawn from Wardrop's extensive experience in northern Ghana.

Issues

Some of the questions we have asked ourselves during project design and implementation have included: Will the increased participation of women lead to "role enlargement," with women having more work and responsibilities or "role empowerment", leading to gender equity, and a more equitable sharing of decision making and family and community responsibilities? What are some of the positive and negative social impacts which the improved water supply will have on the role of women in their communities? How can the benefits be enhanced and the negative impacts mitigated? These are some of the questions that begged for answers as the projects were designed, water supply systems became operational and the project activities were expanded to involve more communities. These questions and issues are not unique to our experience, but have been the focus of discussion in other water and sanitation projects also.

Constraints

The religious influence of Islam, Christianity, and traditional beliefs still perpetuates gender inequity and is often deeply rooted in local culture and values. Change is difficult particularly when power relationships appear to be threatened. The individuals with power may not want to relinquish their control and the people who are becoming more empowered may not be ready or prepared to accept the responsibility.

The staffing profile of most water corporations in developing countries are characterised by many women being employed in the lower skilled and entry level positions, while men dominate the technical, professional and senior management positions. Most water corporation staff, and management, in particular, do not yet perceive

the strategic importance of gender equity in corporation activities. It is almost impossible to convince top-level management personnel, who are almost always male, to attend gender awareness training sessions. Without the support of senior management, it is very difficult to implement a gender equity strategy at the district and community levels.

The role of representational leadership by women is new for many communities. As a result, effective communication and feedback mechanisms between women water committee members and their constituency of women in the community are often absent. In very few of the community committees, where women are in the executive, are women in the chair.

Accounting, banking and record keeping of community water committee income and expenditures remains largely in the male domain due to education and traditional male dominated leadership patterns. The literacy rate of women remains low in Ghana and Uganda and in Sri Lanka where the literacy is relatively high, financial management training of women is limited.

Most of the water corporation planners are male engineers who are usually located in the regional or national headquarters. They frequently look at the technical aspect of the water and sanitation improvements from a distance and usually do not incorporate the strategic and practical needs felt by the communities in general and the women in particular. Women are usually under represented at all levels of the planning process.

These constraints were reinforced by the startling revelations from special training workshops for women members of community-based water committees in Ghana. Among the key observations/constraints raised were:

- traditional processes of socialization and the overbearing impact of religion tend to perpetuate gender inequity. Attempts by women to try and make some changes can bring about destructive criticism and in extreme cases, ostracisation within the community;
- the traditional process of decision making and communications occur within clusters of gender groupings based on occupation, age and profession as well as traditional hierarchies and tends to compromise collective decision making across gender lines; and
- the secrecy surrounding sexual and emotional relations, especially the lack of understanding and sensitivity to the emotional and physical needs of women has often led to a major breakdown of communications

between men and women. In turn this affects the pace of work, frequency of calling meetings and the active involvement of women in decision making over other strategic gender interests and needs in groups or organizations such as the local water committees.

Strategies for change

It is becoming clearer from these project experiences that in order to adequately address gender equity issues attention must be focused on the role of women in: the targeted communities in general; decision making and management practices in the newly created community-based water organizations; within the water corporation at the national and regional levels; and within the project itself at all planning and implementation activity levels.

Within the three Projects there have been common strategies to increase and enhance the participation of women. The project staff have focused attention on increasing the participation of women at the community, water committee, regional/national water corporation and project planning and implementation levels. In each case, the project was committed to increasing the participation of women. Of all the organizations addressing improved water supply and sanitation, the project and the funders were the major agents of change (i.e. working for greater gender equity). Therefore, it is critical that *gender equity goals and targets* are built into the inception plan, policies and procedures of the executing agency. The project staffing patterns should reflect this commitment.

Inclusion of women in *project preparation and design* has been achieved through the involvement of women in data collection in social and technical surveys. The involvement of women, in projects in Ghana, Sri Lanka and Uganda was increased through active and focused outreach. From the inception of the Project, it was acknowledged and put into operation to involve women in a significant way at all stages and levels of the Projects.

Women have played a key role in participatory rehabilitation planning to select service levels and locate service outlets that meet their needs. In Sri Lanka, it was thought that bringing water sources closer to the homes would relieve women and children of the time consuming trips to the water source for bathing. However, through the implementation of the social surveys with women, it was learned that, women preferred to continue to use communal wells for bathing. This provides them an opportunity they are not willing to relinquish, to satisfy socialization needs, such as discussion of family problems, gossiping and sharing of community news.

Throughout *project implementation* gender sensitisation sessions for the community water boards, local government and water corporation staff has made valuable contributions to the project formulating and producing a coherent gender and development strategy. Women have had significant involvement in the Ghana Water and Sewerage Assistance Project (GAP) for the past five years. Gender sensitisation training has been implemented for all

levels of staff and community, honest and frank discussion of the expectations of the Project with respect to the involvement of women, and development and implementation of a gender strategy for the Project have helped to overcome some of the barriers. Technical aspects of water supply, management, operation and maintenance have not been demystified enough. As a result, women lack effective input in the areas of decision making which remains a male domain. Women usually lack the knowledge and skill to maintain and operate the water supply system, but when given training and opportunities they are able, interested and willing. In Sri Lanka, as water providers and water managers, women have traditionally developed a wide range of strategies to obtain, purify and preserve water and to use it frugally. There is knowledge which local women have of water management, thus water projects need to take the time to discern this knowledge and examine its relevance to the proposed improvements. There has been a conscious and targeted approach to facilitate the participation of women on the Water and Sanitation Development Boards (WSDBs) in Ghana and in all related activities. The composition of the community-based water organization is based on representatives from various water user groups, with a significant number of these being women's groups like food sellers and pito brewers. Communities are specifically requested to make sure that an adequate number of women are included in the community water committee, at least one third of the members is recommended.

Gender sensitisation and awareness activities conducted so far have brought about some positive change among water committee members in terms of attitude and behaviour toward gender equity, roles and needs, both practical and strategic, of women. For example, in one community, water was being paid for on a "pay as you fetch" basis as women purchased tokens daily. It appeared that men had no responsibility to provide funds to women to meet the daily requirement of water. A group of poor women in the community, who had no means of income generation, found this arrangement unacceptable and went to the water organization and asked them to change the system of water payment to a flat rate and then it would be the responsibility of the men to pay. The committee was sensitive to their needs, the men did not object and changes were made. The community gender sensitisation and awareness training have also helped to bring about the realization that some of the social, cultural and traditional practices are impediments to progress in many sectors.

In most of the community groups, the treasurers are female as they are trusted and assumed to be honest. It is believed that women will be concerned about the welfare of the community and will see that the money is used for the purpose it was collected, while men will often use community funds for their own personal needs. However, the process of financial management, within an organization or the community at large is such that women are often relegated to secondary positions due to lack of requisite

education to record or keep accounts. Training in finances should be targeted towards women to build and strengthen this role.

District governments are becoming aware and supportive of more active involvement of women in the management of water supplies and sanitation. There remains little representation of women in the District government structure. In Sri Lanka, where many of the community self-help organizers were young women, they worked closely with the local government authorities to ensure the voices of women were heard.

Signs of progress

In Ghana, although there were no women in senior positions within the water corporation, the community liaison staff with the project were 50 per cent women. This was achieved through targeted recruitment to women candidates. In Sri Lanka there were several women in senior positions within the water corporation and at the regional level as sociologists. The executing agency always has women as members of the advisory team.

Women participated in: data collection for community based social surveys; community water supply system design meetings; as members of community based Water Boards, and as project staff. In Ghana, out of a total of 191 men and women in 14 WSDBs, 69 members or 36 per cent are women. Considering the prevailing social and cultural context of northern Ghana, the gender representation, while not equal, is considerably better than that prevailing in other areas of development management and the society at large.

The Savrodaya Movement in Sri Lanka implemented a project in the 1980's where young women were trained to manufacture, repair and operate hand pumps. In Ghana, the GAP is exploring the possibility of spare parts outlets being managed by women and in Uganda women have manufactured and sold sanplats (concrete pads) for latrines in several communities.

Frequently at the community gender awareness training sessions, which have both men and women in attendance, it is the first time that gender roles and responsibilities have been examined and talked about openly. Following the

discussions during the gender awareness training sessions within the communities, a few brave men and women would disregard the criticism directed toward them when they adopted new and non-traditional roles and behaviours within the community and their personal lives. Having all members of the water committee make a commitment to even small changes created a support group within the community to support and sustain the changes.

Women have received training and assumed the role of educators on sanitation and hygiene issues within their communities. This is particularly important in the Muslim communities where women must stay in the home and can only socialize with each other. In these situations training is conducted by women trainers and on a neighbourhood basis. Women from other organizations and agencies have been involved in the delivery of training and this has resulted in growing recognition of women in leadership roles, increased interaction with women on a professional level and increased sensitivity to women's issues.

Conclusions

Women's work in development can only be successful if it is facilitated within an atmosphere of cooperation and coordination between men and women, between government and non-government organizations and between national/regional and community institutions.

A gender approach must be integrated at all levels from the community to the national sector into all activities. A focused, ongoing effort is needed by all project staff to enhance gender equity within the project. Commitment by all stakeholders will sustain and normalize the significant involvement of women in water and sanitation projects. The involvement and contributions by women forms one of the more important evaluation criteria of the Projects.

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