



## Developing a practical guide to mainstreaming gender

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GENDER ISSUES ARE particularly important in water and sanitation projects because in most countries it is women who are the providers, users and managers of domestic water. It also usually women who have responsibility for household health and hygiene. Men often have differing needs and priorities with regard to water, for example livestock watering, which may conflict with the needs of women. It is therefore essential that the needs of both men and women are addressed at all stages of the project cycle and in particular at the planning stage when most of the important decisions are made.

In the past "gender" was at best an add-on or a specialist component of a project and at worst completely ignored; it was certainly considered peripheral or irrelevant by the majority of engineers. It is now more widely acknowledged that gender must be considered by everyone who is involved in the formulation of policies, programmes and projects relating to the provision of infrastructure, not just social development specialists. *The absence of gender (or other people) focus can actually result in vulnerable groups such as women and the poor having more work, less benefit and less control over their situation* (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 1991). It can ultimately lead to the failure of projects or programmes.

The authors are currently working on a research project to develop a practical guide to mainstreaming gender in water and sanitation projects. The target audience for the guide, which is due to be finalised in September 1999, is engineers and managers from both the North and South who are working for governments, consultants, international organisations and NGOs. This paper briefly describes the importance of mainstreaming gender, and outlines the way in which the forthcoming guide aims to provide accessible and practical advice for technical personnel who need to incorporate gender issues at the project and programme level.

### Why should gender be mainstreamed in water and sanitation projects?

Mainstreaming gender means that projects should aim at the transformation of women's lives and not just at the reinforcement of their traditional roles as water carriers and community managers. Projects should therefore be addressing women's strategic needs as well as their practical needs to challenge traditional gender roles and achieve greater equality with men, raise women's status,

power, choice, ownership and control over resources (Legum, 1995).

A mistake which many development projects have made in the past is to assume that women are an under-utilised force to be mobilised in projects. Women were expected to participate, for example by contributing labour or forming committees, but were generally excluded from the decision-making process or from paid labour activities or training. It is now much more clearly understood that women are already overburdened and positive project impacts are those which address women's practical needs. In other words, projects should aim to reduce the daily drudgery of women's domestic chores: for example, by providing closer and more convenient water sources and sanitation facilities and by encouraging better hygiene practices to improve the health of the family.

Water and sanitation projects have great potential for addressing strategic needs as well as practical needs of women. The provision of improved water and sanitation facilities will improve the daily life of women and reduce their domestic burden. This may allow them to allocate more time to income-generating activities. However, there is also a much more potentially far-reaching impact of mainstreaming gender in water and sanitation projects which can challenge women's traditional roles. Women have extensive knowledge on their local water sources and understand how to manage their domestic supplies. They will also have a level of knowledge of family health and hygiene practices. If this knowledge and experience is respected and used during project development it will help to raise women's confidence levels and self-esteem. This can be built on throughout the life of the project by ensuring that women are allowed to make real decisions, are trained to develop skills (such as masonry, handpump maintenance or financial management systems) and ultimately are encouraged to take positions of responsibility. This can all contribute to empowering women, raising their status and shifting the balance of ownership of resources i.e. addressing their strategic needs. A cautionary note is needed here because there is still a risk that women with these new skills will be expected to work on a voluntary basis or will become overburdened.

### Why do engineers and managers need a practical guide?

Engineers working in the water and sanitation sector are increasingly being expected to take a much broader view

than they may have done in the past. The emphasis is now on integrating hardware and software components to ensure that projects and programmes are designed with a strong people-focus to deliver a service, rather than just construct infrastructure. In this context, mainstreaming gender in programmes and projects means that gender must stand alongside technical considerations at all levels of decision making and at all stages of the project cycle, including the design and construction phases. It is therefore essential that engineers and managers understand the relevance, potential benefits and practicalities of mainstreaming gender rather than just paying it lipservice. Since engineers often take a project management role in water and sanitation projects, it is particularly important that they see the bigger picture which includes the need for a gender perspective.

Unfortunately, technical personnel often find it difficult to relate to the sociological issues of gender because the language is non-technical and texts rarely offer practical guidance on how to incorporate gender issues in engineering tasks. The aim of the forthcoming guide is therefore to produce an engineer-friendly document which will detail the benefits and practicalities of mainstreaming gender in water and sanitation projects.

### How will the guide work?

The guide is divided into five chapters as follows:

- Chapter 1 provides an introduction and a quick reference to the guide;
- Chapter 2 explains in engineer-friendly language the importance of mainstreaming gender in water engineering and management and addresses common concerns and objections that technical personnel may have to the approach;
- Chapter 3 uses the project cycle to provide guidance on mainstreaming gender in everyday engineering tasks for water and sanitation projects;
- Chapter 4 summarises sector-specific issues for different types of project (e.g. hygiene promotion, irrigation, emergencies);
- Chapter 5 discusses capacity building measures to reinforce gender sensitive approaches in organisations;
- Appendix 1 provides guidance on the types of tools available to carry out gender analysis.

One of the important features of the practical guide is that the involvement of collaborators from India and South Africa should ensure that includes the views, attitudes and constraints of engineers working in the South. There is also a review group made up of practising engineers from around the world which will help to maintain the focus on gender and engineering.

### Use of case studies

There are some persuasive arguments for convincing engineers to mainstream gender, not least of which is the

potential for achieving project sustainability. The use of case studies can be a powerful tool in illustrating the benefits of fully involving women (and conversely the danger of overlooking their skills or knowledge). The guide therefore makes use of a wide range of case studies drawn from existing literature and from the collaborators and review group. A few of these short case studies as presented in the guide are shown below:

**Case Study:**  
**A handpump installation project in eastern Tanzania**

Gender and age-specific analysis of reported data for urinary schistosomiasis in the project area showed that this water-related disease was most common amongst schoolboys and women and girls between 10 and 40 years age. The incidence among boys was related to the boy's swimming habits, while for women and girls the disease was associated with the local practice of washing clothes while standing in schistosomiasis-infested water. This finding had implications both for the hygiene education programme and for the wells project, which had banned washing clothes at the handpumps and so forced women to continue their use of open water.

*Source: Marie Fry (communication)*

**Case Study:**  
**Spring selection in Zaire**

In a village near Bukavu in Zaire a spring was protected through a local development programme. On visiting the village at a later date, some of the women were asked whether they were happy with the work. They replied that they were not as the protection had been undertaken on the wrong spring. The one developed dries up in the dry season whereas another one on the other side of the village flows all year. They obviously had not been consulted in the project planning stage.

*Source: Lila Pieters (communication)*

**Case Study:**  
**Flexible Timescale for Dodota Rural Water Supply Project, Ethiopia**

The project had its origins in a study on Women in Development by SIDA in Ethiopia in 1988.

Peasant women in Dodota sub district who spent 4-6 hours each day fetching water identified lack of easy access to clean water as their main problem. From the beginning there was no project blue print and no time schedule to follow, so allowing many people to influence the shape and content of the project. Women were trained to operate and maintain the communal water points, and to manage the overall scheme e.g. keep the books and collect fees. *There was continuous dialogue between the women and the technical designer* of the project which led to some innovative adaptations of the standard design. This was one of the factors leading to a strong sense of ownership of the project. The project took six years from identification to its handing over to the local community.

*(White, 1997)*

## Focusing on engineering activities in the project cycle

In order to assist engineers in their everyday tasks, gender issues are considered at each stage of the project cycle which in this guide is broken down into.

- Policy formulation and dialogue.
- Programme and project identification and planning.
- Detailed design.
- Construction.
- Operation and maintenance.
- Evaluation

Other gender texts use a similar approach (e.g. Wakeman (1995) and IRC (1994)) but the difference is that in this guide the focus is exclusively on technical and engineering activities. At each stage of the project cycle, the guide provides a straightforward checklist of the type of questions that engineers are asking in order to ensure that both women's and men's needs are met. The checklist for the construction stage is shown in Table 1.

## Conclusion

Engineers and managers responsible for the planning and implementation of water and sanitation projects and programmes need to be encouraged and assisted in mainstreaming gender in their projects. At present there is a lack of engineer-friendly texts or guidance to help technical personnel to mainstream gender. The forthcoming practical guide being prepared by the authors aims to help engineers mainstream gender in their everyday work by focusing on engineering activities in the project cycle and using extensive case studies and checklists to relate gender issues to real problems and challenges.

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**Table 1.**

**Example of a checklist from the forthcoming practical guide**

- Checklist for Construction Phase:*
- Are men and women willing and able to contribute to the construction of the project?
  - How is the division of labour to be allocated? Is a general assembly an appropriate forum for this decision-making?
  - Can women contribute within their daily schedule without becoming overburdened or neglecting other duties (eg child care, subsistence farming)?
  - Are women and men getting rewarded (financially or in-kind) on an equal basis?
  - Is there scope for training women as well as men to undertake skilled work (e.g. well-sinking, slab casting, latrine construction, spring protection)?
  - Are the proposed construction methods and the equipment safe and appropriate for women?

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