

RWSSP: Technical Advisory Note 2.3 Gender Issues in RWSS Projects.



Introduction

Gender is a vital issue in rural water supply and sanitation (RWSS) projects. However considering gender issues in RWSS projects is not just a case of giving women an opportunity to have a say in the project – though that is important. Nor is it just a case of making women more influential by giving them specific tasks/roles in the project. That may be counterproductive.

What is needed is a gender approach in RWSS projects that takes into account the responsibilities and needs of women and men in the design and management of projects. It needs to be understood that gender relations between men and women concerning water are often specific to a particular context or community situation. Efforts therefore need to be made to ensure the fullest possible participation of both men and women from target communities throughout the project process.



Recognising Gender Issues in Water and Sanitation

Women and men use water and contribute to community water management in different ways. For example, it is mainly women and girls who use water for domestic purposes, while men and boys may compete for water from the same sources for farming purposes.

Fetching and carrying water is part of the daily routine of hundreds of thousands of women in PNG. Water containers typically hold about 20 litres and weigh 20 kg. Frequently carrying such a heavy weight on the head, back or hip can have severe health implication for women and can cause complications in pregnancy and childbirth.



Collecting water is not only physically stressful but also time consuming. Women in PNG frequently have to walk several kilometres, often down and up steep hillsides, every day to fetch water. In the dry season customary sources are often depleted and water collection takes even more time. Children and particularly girls are required to help their mothers with water collection and other domestic water use tasks. This means they may be unable to attend school and often have little time left to play and socialise.



Concerning sanitation, women have different privacy requirements and personal hygiene needs from men. There are also traditional beliefs in some areas of PNG that affect women's and men's bathing practices that need to be recognised, e.g. women must wash themselves downstream from where men wash.

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In poor communities where sanitation is inadequate and water supplies are sufficient for only the bare necessities of life, making decision about the use of water and about sanitation/hygiene practices, for both men and women, may come down to hard choices between needs for the individuals and other requirements outside.

Women's Role in RWSS Projects

Giving women specific roles or task in RWSS projects may be appropriate. For example women are the main users of water points, so they may be the best community members to be responsible for deciding on the siting of water points, maintenance issues, even technical maintenance. Similarly, women are the main providers of health care in families so it is sensible to equip them to be able to provide hygiene education for children.



However any tasks assigned to women through a project need to be carefully considered and rationalised. This is because filling the time saved for women from the burden of collecting water with other duties, such as water point maintenance or hygiene education, is a gender blind approach which can undermine the potential benefits for women and their families of time saving through improved RWSS facilities. The time saved may be more productively used for childcare, other domestic tasks, rest and social interactions and often income-generating activities.



It is enhancing the decision-making role of women which can have the greatest impact on the sustainability of RWSS projects. This needs to be acted upon at various levels and at all stages of RWSS project implementation.

Concluding Comments

From international experience of RWSS programmes and projects it is now widely recognised that their success depends on the active involvement of women. It is women who fetch and store water, dispose of domestic waste and children's excreta, teach hygiene habits to children and provide much of the health care in the family. It is therefore essential that women are central to community decision making concerning RWSS project activities and that men are helped to understand and accept this.

Facilitating women's participation in RWSS projects and in decision making processes requires that projects employ sufficient number of women on their staff in positions where they can influence programming decisions. Moreover female project staff are more effective than men in communicating and facilitating activities specifically for women in target communities.

A useful tool for changing men's perception of women's roles in water and sanitation at the village level, is the timeline, explained in Tan Tool 5.6



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