Empowering Women in the WASH Sector: A Woman's Burden

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Empowering Women in the WASH Sector: A Woman’s Burden

By Yari Greeney, Becky Chanis, Gemma Bulos and Rachel Cardone
In an issue 4 of WH2O Journal, Joyce Mpalayani Magana, PhD researcher for Water For Life, conducted an ethnographic study in one village to explore women’s roles in community water management (page 14, issue 4). Referring to the Directorate of Water Management guidelines for operations and maintenance (O&M) of water supply systems that were developed in 2007, she researched the application of these, which suggested including both women and men in water user committees and descriptions of their respective roles. She found that while the committees met gender quotas (50% women), they failed to address underlying gender dynamics between men and women. As a result, men had a minimal role in the ongoing operations and maintenance (O&M) of water systems; this fell on the shoulders of women; and women had no support and no voice in water governance, which was dominated by men.

Similarly, in 2012, Uganda Water Alliance (UWA), a consortium of WASH organizations contributing to the WASH goals of Ugandan government, conducted a Gender Audit with their partners with intention to mainstream Gender and WASH programming in Uganda. In 2016, UWA expanded its scope to go beyond gender to inclusion, with the intention to create a shared understanding about the concept and importance of “Inclusion” among WASH Alliance partners. Inclusion means to ensure that all are able to participate fully regardless of differences in socio-economic status, gender, education, etc. Using the Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) framework created by International WASH Alliance, they found a lack of knowledge, resources and mechanisms to support gender mainstreaming strategies. Notably, gender mainstreaming in water supply and sanitation has been a formal, national policy in Uganda since 2004, mandating a range of activities, including formulation of a sexual harassment policy (which applies to government workers, not Water User Committee members); requiring all Water User Committees to include women in at least one third of committee positions; and that data on services and at Committee meetings (which gets reported to the national level) be disaggregated by gender. Despite these mandates, audits and reports are still only tracking women’s representation and participation.

Building on these findings, which used a horizontal approach across multiple regional partners, Engineers Without Borders-Canada (EWB-Ca)’s Governance for Sustainable Services Portfolio, which takes an investment-approach to improving WASH services, in partnership with Global Women’s Water Initiative (GWWI), an organization that trains women to become WASH technicians, trainers and social entrepreneurs, conducted an exploratory study, taking the vertical approach interviewing stakeholders from the Ministry level down to water user committees and service providers in 3 districts. EWB-Ca and GWWI were interested to understand what, if any, gender-based barriers to sustainable WASH services existed in Uganda, and if these could be used to identify entry points for investment, in EWB-Ca’s case, and for training and advocacy, in GWWI’s case. The research was focused primarily on rural water services, and was conducted by two research fellows: Becky Chanis, for EWB-Ca, and Yari Greeney, for GWWI, supported and managed by Rachel Cardone and Gemma Boulos, of EWB-Ca and GWWI, respectively.

The research methodology incorporated both a systems- and gender-based analysis of sustainable water service delivery in Uganda. In a broad sense, its goal was to identify challenges with the accountability mechanisms that exist in the governance flows of rural water service delivery, and identify gender dynamics within those flows. The governance flows are (1) planning, (2) finance, (3) reporting, (4) data and (5) service implementation. “Accountability mechanisms” refer to the ways in which water service delivery workers attempt to ensure that other members of the delivery system meet the expectations of their respective jobs.

This article draws from their analysis, to identify gaps in WASH governance flows and the gender dynamics that affect the delivery of efficient and effective WASH services.
Challenges in Water Service Delivery

Water service delivery is governed through a complex institutional framework that is, in Uganda, largely decentralized. Policy, financing and monitoring are conducted by the central government, and implementation is managed by regional structures and district governments. The Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE) houses the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC), a parastatal that supplies water to cities, municipalities and large towns. Within the MWE, the Directorate of Water Development (DWD) is responsible for overseeing water service delivery in small towns, rural growth centers and rural areas, while Water User Committees (WUC) are responsible for water provision and management of water supply systems.

Below is a visual framework of the idealized WASH governance system, as articulated by the Government of Uganda’s various water policies. As seen, there are feedback loops between and among different levels of governance, starting with the relationship between WASH consumers and their service providers. This initial framework is presented in Figure 1 below and then is modified given the research findings.
After conducting a literature review and qualitative interviews, the governance flows were re-mapped, and re-defined as information flows (data collection, planning and reporting), finance flows and service delivery flows (see Figure 2 below). The goal was to understand how different actors in the WASH governance system hold each other accountable when performing WASH-related tasks. The research shows the flows to be roughly the same as those depicted in Figure 1, but with several disconnects relating to how implementation of these flows. The research then identified a few key breakdowns and inefficiencies that can be taken as the starting point for considering experimentation by different sector actors.

As opposed to the idealized flows in Figure 1, Figure 2 shows a proliferation of informal reporting flows, particularly at the service provider level. This suggests an ineffective or inaccessible governance system to support ongoing services at the WUC level. The data flow from the water source to the District is also partially informal, as opposed to the formal flow depicted in Figure 1. This is because there is not a single position designated for data collection and data collectors are inconsistent within and between districts.
Gender Dynamics in Service Delivery

The research also identified a few key areas where gender dynamics may be contributing to inefficient WASH governance, and potentially stifling sustainable WASH service delivery. Participants frequently accredited women’s lack of involvement in WASH governance to women’s shyness, weakness, and lack of confidence, rather than to apparent social and institutional barriers that surfaced during the interviews. Many participants indicated that the key to increasing female involvement in WASH governance is for women to gain greater self-confidence. This belief frequently excluded any discussion of social and institutional barriers that women face.

It is important to reiterate that the findings of this study are not generalizable, and are based on exploratory research. They are intended to offer insight for further research, experimentation, and potential investments or project avenues.

Overview of Study Process

The research project employed a mixed-method, exploratory framework, using business process mapping, qualitative interviews, and quantitative surveys. The framework used a concurrent nested methodology, with the qualitative analysis acting as the cornerstone of the assessment. The quantitative analysis is a secondary and supportive tool to provide further clarity on the results. Both of these were layered on top of a systems map of the governance flows, designed using a business mapping model, to illustrate where bottlenecks and challenges occur.

Governance flows of data, reporting, finance, and service delivery (O&M and repairs) were mapped based upon a review of literature. The researchers then distributed surveys and conducted 61 interviews with WASH governance workers from MWE and three districts, sub-counties and service providers including WUCs, CSOs, and schools that manage rainwater tanks. The survey assessed gender knowledge, gender beliefs, and workplace behaviors surrounding gender. The goals of these semi-structured interviews were to verify an understanding of the flows of governance; identify challenges within those flows that prevent participants from working effectively; identify accountability mechanisms and other strategies that participants employ in order to address these challenges; and understand participants’ perspectives on gender dynamics in the workplace.

Summary of Findings

Findings are based upon 61 surveys and interviews with WASH governance workers including employees from MWE, district water offices, sub-counties, CSOs, private operators, and WUCs.

First, the governance flows surrounding data collection and information flows to support sustainable WASH services lacks strong institutional structure and accountability mechanisms, and there are limited feedback loops from central back to local levels of governance. Different districts are able to utilize different district and sub-county workers to collect the data required by MWE (there is not a designated position that is uniformly responsible for data collection). Perhaps as a result, there are no standardized reporting systems that collect the same data across service providers. Also, districts sometimes rely on unsalaried hand-pump mechanics to report service data, with limited to no accountability mechanisms. Further, data collectors at district and sub-county levels often lack a clear understanding of how data is used and why it is important, since there are no feedback loops back to service providers. This could be a limiting factor to the collection of high-quality data. Finally, sub-counties and communities who develop plans and collect data on a regular basis, but which but repeatedly do not receive funding to implement their plans may develop participation fatigue, and feel discouraged from continuing to participate in the planning process.

In addition, financial flows - which mostly closely relate to the operation and maintenance of services - is currently unsustainable because it falls on the shoulders of WUCs, who are frequently voluntary, under-resourced, and threatened by community members. In practice, the government has asked communities to make very abrupt changes in their relationship with water services: from a relationship of never paying, to suddenly paying a committee that is comprised of their neighbors, who may - or may not - be trustworthy. From an accountability perspective, WUC members - who are also their neighbors - are offered little to no resources to enforce services in accordance with district and national policies, yet are expected to carry the full weight of responsibility for services, particularly when the service fails. This is in a context where Districts defer expensive repairs as long as possible, given limited financial resources available to them.

The research identified several institutional and social barriers to meeting the national policy vision, which were specific to gender, and which related from the very local level, where services are provided,
through to the national policy level. For example, at the district and MWE of WASH governance, both males and females emphasize that there is equality. They argue that women and men should thus perform equally, despite there being a lack of women’s capacity building programs or interest in implementing effective gender mainstreaming strategies, which would help to strengthen equity in what has, traditionally, been a male-dominated field.

Other apparent barriers at the district and national levels that surfaced in this limited research include failure to offer work experiences to women because they need, or may in the future need, maternity leave. Men expressed their discomfort with women in the workplace and some held resentment when women co-workers appeared to be favored. Some male respondents felt pressure because they worried that women would make their work uncomfortable because they believed women adhere to strict deadlines. Men also feared that women would work harder and out-compete them. At the service delivery level, women experienced extra difficulties in acquiring transport to collect fees and collect data. For example, women are expected to pay boda drivers rather than borrow a motorcycle, like men would be able to do; men learn how to drive motorcycles as part of growing up, whereas it is unseemly for a young woman to do so. When hiring a driver, women shared their experiences of being rushed because hired drivers are in a hurry or doesn’t want to wait, which inhibits thorough data collection. Further, when women try to collect delinquent payments for water services from male users, several female respondents shared stories of threats and violence.

Conclusion

This exploratory research into how gender dynamics in WASH governance affect the sustainability of WASH services suggests several areas for deeper research. The research identified a common mindset across all levels of governance that the lack of women’s empowerment is the key barrier to deeper involvement by women in WASH governance, particularly at district and national levels, despite several examples of gender-based barriers that are in place which, at least in this exploratory research - inhibit true gender mainstreaming. There are few programs that build capacity of women as service providers, effective WUC members, or facilitators of district- and national scale WASH governance, even as the responsibility of empowerment and responsibility for water provision - particularly in rural areas - falls primarily on the shoulders of women. Failure to recognize and address institutional barriers may decrease the diversity of perspectives involved in decision-making, and thus reduce the effectiveness of service delivery for the female population.

Read the full report here.