

The unsung heroes in water, sanitation and hygiene delivery

Empowering ordinary women and inspire change in communities



Ruth Loilik is hygiene educator in Kochito village, Lorengechora sub county, Napak District. Ruth is among ne of the many ordinary women in Karamoja region empowered by WaterAid to inspiring other community members take up good sanitation and hygiene practices. Photo: WaterAid/James Kiyimba

International Women's Day is commemorated on 8th March. It's the one day of the year when people around the world come together across physical and cultural divides to celebrate achievements of women while calling for greater equality. In most countries, it is usually successful women in politics, business and academia who occupy most of the limelight.

In WaterAid Uganda however, this day, we are celebrating acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played extraordinary roles in the history of their communities to ensure sustainable access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene

education. Life without access to clean water and toilets is unbearable for everybody. But the consequences of not having these basic services affect women and girls the most.

This year's theme, "**Empowering Women - Empowering Humanity: Picture It!**" reminds us of a world where each woman and girl can live a dignified life, enjoying her fundamental human rights, participating in decision making processes, have access to safe water and sanitation, equal access to education and live in societies free from violence and all forms of discrimination.

Women champions for water, sanitation and hygiene delivery

Since 1983, when WaterAid set foot in Uganda, women have been part and parcel to our efforts of bringing safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services closer to thousands of people in Uganda.

In recognition of the contribution of ordinary women in the WASH sector Peter Okubal - WaterAid Uganda Country Representative says:

“In all our work, women and girls are actively playing key roles to ensure sustainable access to safe water and sanitation. They are taking up leadership positions on the water users’ committees, many are on their Village Health Teams promoting good sanitation and hygiene practices in their communities. Many have become WASH ambassadors in their communities thereby helping other people escape poverty and diseases due to improved access to WASH

In schools we support, we find empowered girls in health clubs making reusable sanitary pads in order to stay in school, as well as inspiring others to become WASH agents of change within their schools and communities where they come from. Despite their contribution however, majority of these women and girls are not recognised for their efforts. This International Women’s Day we want to bring to your attention that many such heroes exist in our communities. ”

Veronica not ready to retire until everybody practices good sanitation and hygiene in Kochito village

At 65 years, Veronica Lowakori is still very strong. Every day she goes around her homestead (manyata) talking to people about the dangers of open defecation and encouraging them to start using latrines and maintain good hygiene practices.

It is because of her zeal and passion towards improved sanitation and hygiene that she is among the many unsung heroes we are recognising this International Women’s Day.

Veronica lives in Kochito village, Lorengechora Sub County, Napak district, in the Karamoja region of North Eastern Uganda. In her district only one in every three people have latrines in



Veronica Lowakori is famous in Kochito village for being a good sanitation and hygiene ambassador; her home is a model for good sanitation and hygiene in the village. Photo: WaterAid/ James Kiyimba

their homes, they practice open defecation. She is our hero because her ability to mobilise her village members, telling them about sanitation and hygiene, encouraging them to start using latrines.

A year ago, Veronica learnt about sanitation from Karamoja Agro Pastoral Development Programme (KADP)- a local NGO implementing a WASH programme with support from WaterAid and the European Union Water Facility.

KADP is using a community lead sanitation approach locally known as Umoja (a Swahili word for unity). The approach empowers community members to actively lead in improving their sanitation and hygiene conditions by creating disgust for open defecation as well as demand for improved sanitation and hygiene.

This is exactly what Veronica is doing: “This is my latrine; all members of my family no longer go to the bush to defecate. Since soap is very costly, I have taught them to use ash to wash their hands after visiting the latrine in order to kill off disease causing germs. Ever since we started using latrines, we only got one case of hepatitis E last year in our village and all people in the village are happy because of the dignity they have nowadays. When growing up, we never used latrines but only the bush, this is shameful, we cannot continue with this,” Veronica recalls.

At the moment 31 out of 62 households in Kochito village have constructed and are using latrines,

they also have bath shelters and dish drying racks. Veronica working hand in hand with the village hygiene educator, elders and the village health team have set themselves a target to have all people construct latrines in their households by June 2015.

“I also encouraged my people to construct bath shelters. Ever since I constructed a bath shelter, I am able to bathe with dignity any time of the day. Before I could only bathe at night under the cover of darkness,” Veronica says.

“We no longer have to live with this shame. My big dream is to see all people in Kochito village using latrines, bath shelters and practice hand washing especially after using these latrines. My new strategy is to focus on the younger people because they are the future generation of our community. They have to grow up appreciating improved sanitation and good hygiene practices”

Girl power – inspiring change for good sanitation and hygiene

Among the many unsung heroes in schools we work is Stella Judith Arago 15. She is a pupil of Amuria Integrated Primary School. Listening to her speaking, you can't miss noticing



Stella Judith Arago - Head of Health Club

that she is a future leader in the making. At the moment Stella is the head of her School Health Club, a position she was voted into, because of her leadership acumen and passion for good sanitation and hygiene.

“My favourite subject at school is science, in the future I want to become a nurse because I know how to promote good health through sanitation and hygiene,” Stella says. “As the head of the school's health club, my role includes talking to other pupils about safe water, sanitation and personal hygiene practices. I make sure that we have sanitation parades every Wednesday of the week to see if all pupils are clean. On the parade, I look for pupils with long finger nails and make sure that they are cut short.



“we are ready to be good sanitation change agents.” Members of the School Health Club after a training session

“Our school health club is comprised of 50 members with representatives from different classes. We have a schedule for pupils to sweep their classes, clean the school latrines and the compound. I have taught other members of the health club how to construct hand washing facilities using local materials, and many pupils in our school are now washing their hands with soap after visiting a latrine,” Stella adds.

“In the club, we use music, dance and drama to teach others pupils and our parents about sanitation and hygiene. Music and drama helps us not to forget what we have learnt from the club. At home we never used to wash hands after using a latrine, but after joining the health club, I made sure that all people at home wash their hands after using a latrine and before handling food.”



In the School Health Club members have learnt how to construct dish drying racks and hand washing facilities. Photo: WaterAid/James Kiyimba

Amuria girls make their own reusable sanitary pads in order not to miss school due to poor menstrual management

In many developing countries, menstrual hygiene management is being increasingly recognised as big challenge for women and girls.

The subject is not only surrounded by taboos and secrecy but women and girls' capacity to manage their periods is also affected by other factors, including limited access to affordable and hygienic sanitary materials, lack of private changing rooms in schools or even limited access to water for washing during periods leaving many girls to manage their periods in ineffective, uncomfortable and unhygienic ways.

In Amuria Primary School however, the situation is changing, many adolescent girls have mastered the art of making reusable sanitary pads in order to stay in school. These youngsters' efforts to challenge taboos should never be underrated; they have taken the right steps to break the silence on menstrual management. Making reusable sanitary pads is a sign of determination, an outward desire to stay in school; gain life skills that will take them out of poverty.

Poor menstrual management results in girls' absence from school for a number of days per month leading to poor performance and sometimes dropping out of school completely.

A study carried out by SNV Uganda (Netherlands Development Organisation) revealed that girls in rural Uganda generally miss up to eight days of study each school term due to poor menstrual management.



Amuria Primary School girls making reusable sanitary pads at school. Photo: WaterAid/ James Kiyimba

The girls of Amuria Primary School are challenging this; they are not ready to miss any of their school days because they don't have sanitary pads. They are now in control of their menstrual management. Working under the guidance of their senior woman teacher, the school health club equips adolescent girls with the right information necessary for proper management of menstruation, helping them to break the silence on the subject which many people in Africa fear to discuss openly.

WaterAid empowers school girls

WaterAid Uganda under the schools' water, sanitation and hygiene program is working with more than 60 schools in both urban poor and rural communities, improving sustainable access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene for all as well as empowering girls with life skills for proper management of menstruation in order to stay in school. Improved access to safe water and sanitation transforms women's lives, enabling them to fulfil their potential.

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