

Gender aspects of water and sanitation

1. Background

1.1 Women are most affected by lack of sanitation and safe water. Women are the ones who bear the burden of carrying water for up to 5 hours a day. They also bear the brunt of poor health and the security risks that arise when they are forced to go out at night to defecate in private. One of DFID's key priorities is to improve gender equality (Millennium Development Goal 3), and the Department has focused its efforts in particular on target 4 – the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education. DFID has identified investments in basic education for girls and women as having positive impacts on the wider society by boosting family incomes, reducing fertility rates and contributing to better health and nutrition. However, DFID has not given sufficient consideration to the impact of water fetching labour and the precedence it is given in household priorities over school attendance and that this burden falls overwhelmingly on girl children. This paper argues that improving gender equality, improving women's livelihoods, the education and life chances of girl children and the health of families is critically dependent on making progress in water supply and sanitation. Any departmental strategy to address gender imbalance in developing countries must properly consider and address these linkages.

How the lack of water impacts on health, education and livelihoods

2.1 There needs to be increased focus on how women's economic and domestic activities are affected by infrastructure or its absence. In most societies women have primary responsibility for household water supply and sanitation. They require water for drinking, food production and preparation, personal and family hygiene, washing, cleaning and caring for the sick. They also require access to water for productive uses – evidence shows that women are responsible for half of the world's food production, and in most developing countries women produce 60-80% of the food¹.

2.2 Securing enough water to meet family needs has a direct bearing on women's health and their access to education and employment. A recent report² presents evidence that hauling heavy loads over long distances can lead to physical damage to the back and neck. It also documents the risk of physical assault and rape and the dangers of navigating unsafe waterholes.

2.3 Fetching water takes time – an estimated 700 hours per person per year in Ghana³ which keeps girls out of school and limits the economic productivity of women. Globally, more than 1 in 5 girls of primary school age are not in school. This is in part attributable to a lack of clean water available at community level. Girls, like their mothers, must often walk miles to fetch the daily water supply.

1 Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), Gender and Food security in Agriculture (1995) <http://www.fao.org/Gender/en/agri-e.htm>

2 WSSCC, For her it's the big issue. Putting Women at the centre of water supply, sanitation and hygiene. Evidence report (2006). Available at: www.wash-cc.org and www.genderandwater.org

3 World Bank, Case study on the Role of Women in Rural Transport (1994)

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2.4 Girls who have reached menstrual age may also be deterred from school by inadequate sanitation in public places. Simple measures, such as providing schools with water and latrines, and promoting hygiene education in the classroom, can enable girls to get an education, especially after they reach puberty, and reduce health-related risks for all. WaterAid Bangladesh found that a school sanitation project with separate facilities for boys and girls helped boost girls' school attendance 11 per cent per year, on average, from 1992 to 1999.

2.5 Time savings also have a considerable impact on women's livelihoods. WaterAid has documented the case of Zeini Batti, from Ethiopia, widow and family breadwinner, describing the economic benefits of having water close to home: 'In the past, I used to devote five hours a day to fetch water. Since 1995 (when the water point was built), life has somehow become easy. I now have more time, and can do other activities like basket-weaving and making utensils. I now save a minimum of Birr 21-22 (£2) each year.'⁴

2.6 The World Health Organisation estimates that 40 billion working hours are spent carrying water each year in Africa⁵. If the average one hour per day saved by each household member can be used to generate some income, the saved time is worth a staggering US\$ 63 billion⁶.

2.7 WaterAid believes that the inadequate prioritisation of the water and sanitation sector by many low-income country governments is a function of the lack of voice and power of women in political society. While the poor, and women in particular, consistently put access to water and adequate sanitation as one of their top three – and frequently first – development priorities, the sector still lags behind other sectors prioritised by both donors and recipients.

2.8 In Nigeria, although women account for about 50% of the population, they are extremely marginalized at the formal political level. For example, after the 1999 General elections, men held 347 seats in the House of Representatives, while women held only thirteen. In the senate, there were 106 male Senators against 3 female Senators. Among the executive, there were only 6 female Ministers against 46 men. There was no single female governor out of 36. This situation is also reflected at the local government level. Even in communities where water committees are set up with participation, women's impact on decision making is limited. Family responsibilities, including the burden of water fetching labour, and other cultural issues constrain most of them from active participation.

Participation of women in the programme cycle

3.1 "The bore-hole in my village is so heavy that women and children find it difficult to use"⁷ At the formal employment level, water engineers and other related professions are dominated by men. In community water activities, it is men that are trained to site and manage community hand pumps, wells and other water sources. In irrigation, farming men still control the resources because they dominate access to land entitlements and its resources. Although women have the main responsibility for water provision, they are often overlooked in the planning and implementation of infrastructure development and water projects.

3.2 Research carried out by WaterAid Nigeria⁸ found that because women are involved in the informal sector and domestic activities they do not have time to participate in decision making processes. Decision making at both household and national level is dominated by men. Very few decisions at the household can be taken by women, even when it concerns participating in their own groups or household welfare or the

⁴ WaterAid, Looking Back (2001) <http://www.wateraid.org/other/startdownload.asp?DocumentID=133&mode=plugin>

⁵ World Health Organisation, Evaluation of the Costs and Benefits of Water and Sanitation Improvements at the Global Level(2004) http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/wsh0404/en/

⁶ Idem

⁷ WaterAid Nigeria, Interview in Bauchi (2005)

⁸ Abantu for Development for WaterAid Nigeria, Water and Sanitation Sector Analysis on Gender in Nigeria (2005)

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use of their income. According to the Federal Ministry for Health in Nigeria, men make 57% of all decisions on health-related issues at the household level even though women are, by and large, held responsible for providing care and support for sick family members.

3.3 National development plans, including PRSPs and sectoral plans, often fail to reflect the priorities or the needs of women. It is often assumed that proposed development interventions will automatically benefit women and the poor and that community leaders reflect their needs. However, the marginalisation of the sector in many national development plans set against the evidence of prioritisation by the poor suggests that there is a need for deliberate policy actions to provide opportunities to better articulate the interests of the poor in the policy-making process. In South Africa, for instance, gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution, and the water and sanitation policy sets quotas for participation of women in water management issues. However, a study funded by the Water Research Commission⁹ revealed that the 30% quota for women's participation in water policy making did not guarantee meaningful participation because women were reluctant to voice their opinions in mixed groups due to cultural constraints and lack of information on the range of policy options.

3.4 Women's presence is critical to the sustainability of water and sanitation initiatives, particularly in technical and managerial roles, to ensure they contribute to decision-making processes. Ensuring women gain access to information about project plans and resource allocations is also essential. DFID should set aside funds for the training and capacity building for women to engage in the water sector.

3.5 Empowerment of women does not happen over night. However WaterAid and partners have recognised the importance of pushing for change, rather than accepting the status quo ante. One way of doing this is to encourage communities to share decision-making roles, including women as chair, secretary and/or treasurer of committees. Best practice in community development, particularly using Participatory Rapid Appraisal techniques, suggest that building in a gender dimension at the outset of the analysis and decision-making processes can bring more sustainable outcomes.

3.6 Finally, DFID has a role to play in encouraging national governments and sector stakeholders to monitor and evaluate the provision of water and sanitation to the most vulnerable groups, and to ensure that women and men benefit equally from projects. This requires the strengthening of data collection in order that information on access rates and level of use among men and women is produced in a disaggregated and accessible way.

Key Recommendations to DFID

Ensure that the next departmental strategy on gender equality and reporting on the Department's contribution to achieving gender equity in primary school enrolments addresses access to water supply and sanitation.

Through DFID's participation in Sector Review and in any Poverty Reduction Strategy meetings promote the participation of the genuine representatives of poor urban and rural women's groups to strengthen the voice of women in the policy design process.

DFID's direct funding and procurement of local technical assistance should have seek to redress the under-representation in the water and sanitation profession. This might include DFID's allocable aid supporting programmes for training women in technical and managerial careers in the water and sanitation sector and enable women and girls to acquire access to information about programme planning and resource allocation.

⁹ Robert Berold for the Water Research Commission, How is Gender Policy Working on the Ground? (2004) http://www.wrc.org.za/publications_other_special.htm

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Support recipient governments efforts to ensure that the overall national sanitation framework is gender sensitive and cross-cuts other departments including Education to promote hygiene education in school curricula and separate sanitation facilities for boys and girls.