Introduction

In this series of guidance notes we consider the impacts of Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) projects on women, and how gender awareness training can improve the success and sustainability of WASH projects. This tool considers women in decision making roles, particularly Water User Groups (WUGs). It will consider challenges to women’s participation, actions to enable women to get involved, outcomes and benefits, and indicators.

What is a Water User Group?

Water User Groups (WUG), known under a variety of names, are committees of ordinary community members set up to manage water sources. Through cooperative management they are responsible for managing water sources so that they meet community requirements and are sustainable.

Traditionally WUGs are headed by men, and this can lead to difficulties with community WASH practices as women’s needs are often overlooked. Examples of problems stemming from male dominated management of WASH include:

- Water source located in inappropriate locations; increasing collection times and potential risk to collectors, increasing risk of harassment and SGBV, reducing privacy.
  - In Afghanistan the water pumps are often placed close to mosques for the convenience of male members of the community. Due to cultural and religious traditions this means that women and girls are unable to use these water pumps, and they have to travel further to make water collections.
  - In Liberia a town-chief requested the borehole to be placed near his compound. This means that the women of the village do not use that borehole as they are harassed by the men who sit outside the chief’s house.
  - In one Ethiopian case study girls are afraid to use a water supply which has been located on the village playing fields. Lots of men and boys hang around here and many girls have been molested and abused here.
- Water supply is not maintained to high enough standards as it is not a priority for men so water quality and quantity are affected and the benefits are lost.

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1 IWMI (International Water Management Institute) and SIC ICWC (the Scientific Information Centre Interstate Commission for Water Coordination), 2003. How to Establish a Water Users Association. IWMI and SIC ICWC.
Women’s hygiene products are not considered, and there is no disposal for sanitary materials.

**Women and WUGs**

Typically, women play a central role in community WASH activities—collecting water, promoting good hygiene practice, maintaining sanitation facilities and managing water use in the home—and as such are well-placed to contribute to WUGs, especially as they are more likely to consider important but traditionally overlooked factors.

Past WASH projects have shown that when women participate alongside men the projects have enhanced efficiency and performance: WUGs maintain facilities to a higher standard; more people use the WASH facilities; and committee management is shown to be more effective. It has also been observed that women being involved in decision-making roles within WUGs can benefit gender needs both practically, for example reduced labour and increased female power, and strategically, in terms of gender equality.

The next steps will consider the challenges to women in WUGs, actions and project best practice for empowering women in WUGS, impacts and outcomes of women’s involvement, and indicators which can be useful for measuring gender factors within WUG WASH projects.

### Challenges

A variety of factors can be attributed to the underrepresentation of women in WUGs. These are described in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Limitations</th>
<th>Male Superiority</th>
<th>Male Respect</th>
<th>Male Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Superiority</td>
<td>A long set perception of men being superior in a Brazilian village meant that having women in positions of responsibility went against cultural norms, and so they were limited in their ability to join WUGs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male Respect</td>
<td>In South Africa women are usually not allowed to attend WUG meetings if men are present, and when they do attend the women must sit behind the men out of respect, and not speak out loud.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Support</td>
<td>One Brazilian village saw that women would not join the WUG if not supported by their husbands. Some who did join later left when their husbands did not show support for their position in the committee.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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6 IASC, 2006. *Gender and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Emergencies in IASC Gender Handbook*


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elder Respect</th>
<th>In some cultures women cannot take on positions of leadership if meetings will be attended by older women of the same community as it is considered disrespectful to do so.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Other Constraints | Women cannot join WUGs because:  
• They cannot travel alone  
• They cannot travel at night  
• They cannot speak in front of men  
• They cannot speak in public |
| Structural Limitations | WUG Membership  
Often membership of WUGs is only open to formal owners of land and water, excluding most women from participating. |
| Lack of Knowledge | Illiteracy and Schooling  
Amongst poorer groups, females spend less time in education than men in the same community. They also make up more than two thirds of illiterate individuals across the world. |
| Technological Knowledge | Women typically have less access to knowledge in both areas of science and technology and so often feel they cannot make decisions around technical subjects such as water management. |

Meeting and discussing women’s needs for WASH facilities can help WUGs to become more sustainable.

13 Olinto, P., Beegle, K., Sobrado, C. & Uematsu, H., 2013. The State of the Poor: Where are the Poor, Where is Extreme Poverty Harder to End, What is the Current Profile of the World’s Poor?.  
Actions

In order to reduce the challenges and constraints which currently prevent women from being members of WUGs, projects should include actions which improve gender equality within communities and enhance the number of women in decision-making roles. There are several approaches which are best practice for projects with WUGs, and these are described below.

Capacity Building

Capacity building refers to the ability of both women and men to participate in WUGs and take on decision-making roles. It is important that all projects invest heavily in capacity building steps so that WUGs can become self-sustainable and have long-term impacts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Sharing</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Technical Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This information must be available to all members of communities. Capacity building must be tailored to meet the socio-cultural needs of the community.</td>
<td>Both men and women must be trained in monitoring and measuring skills, how to plan and implement maintenance actions and how to manage the WUG itself. Creates self-sustainable and self-managing WUGs through training in governance, financial management and monitoring.</td>
<td>Provide technical support to WUGs whilst projects are in action. Enables water, sanitation and hygiene facilities to be correctly maintained and also will help to educate the WUG.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women are often the primary water users at household level. Their input for siting water sources is essential to success.
Gender mainstreaming is the process by which gender is integrated into projects so that women’s needs, and the effects of a project on women are assessed and taken into account. In order to achieve gender mainstreaming in WUG projects it is essential to enhance community awareness of women’s needs and sensitise each gender to the other’s needs and uses for WASH facilities.

### Gender Sensitisation

**Use Community Mobilisation techniques to achieve mass awareness training, activities rolled out in stages.**

The community must be made aware of the differing WASH needs between the two genders.

Active participation of women is essential.

Sensitisation sessions should be facilitated by both men and women.

**Recognise Women’s Roles**

The community must acknowledge women as primary water users.

Recognise that women are largely responsible for water collection and household hygiene and sanitation and consequently have a lot of knowledge about the water source.

**Support Women**

The recognition of women’s roles as water users leads to communities encouraging and supporting women in decision-making roles and positions of power within WUGs.

### Active Participation

Active participation of women in WUGs ensures the sustainability of the committee as it develops a sense of ownership of the water source and sanitation and hygiene facilities and empowers the women through increased security and heightened self-worth.

### Develop Trust

Developing trust between communities and facilitators is an important step in any WASH project. It improves willingness of individuals to actively participate in WUGs, educational activities, and decision-making roles.

### Remove Obstacles

The relative training and information sharing must be provided, the meetings must be held at locations which are accessible to all members of a community, and at an appropriate time for the highest attendance.

### Enable Discussion

It is essential to create an atmosphere where both male and female needs can be discussed openly within the community so that sensitisation to the opposite gender’s WASH needs can occur and gender integration can be achieved.
Equal representation

An important action is ensuring that women and men are equally represented in decision making roles. To ensure that this happens within a WUG it is important that women are given equal access to the training and information required to hold such a position. This may mean that training sessions need to be held at different times of the day, in different buildings or areas of the village and where possible be facilitated by women as well as men; in Ethiopia facilitators of Water Management Schemes and training must be equal women and men.

Sometimes women are already participants in WUGs, but in more difficult roles such as membership fees collectors, it is important to clarify that decision-making roles in particular must be equally held by women and men. In Senegal the government has quotas for WUGs, meaning that legally such associations must have 50% of their decision-making positions filled by women.

The active participation of both men and women in WUG meetings can have significant impacts on decision-making.

Impacts and accomplishments

If the above actions are included in projects then the challenges preventing women from joining WUGs in positions of authority and decision-making roles should be greatly diminished. This section presents the 6 main impacts that can be accomplished when women are involved in WUGs, and provides some examples from case studies. The impacts can be wide ranging, from improved access to WASH facilities and better maintenance of these, to greater sustainability, as well as broader impacts on women’s education, improved household and community relationships and increased household income.

In Morocco a village which built an easily accessible, nearby water source witnessed a 20% increase in girls' school attendance within 4 years of its construction as a result of less time spent collecting water (World Bank, 2003).

In Malawi, a village with a dirty well was replaced by a hand pump. The WUG manages the pump and other WASH projects in the village. The amount of time women now have to spend caring for children sick from drinking contaminated water has greatly reduced, and this has given women more time to spend working in the fields and earn money. The same village has now also built a school, and members of the WUG report improved relationships with their husbands due to reduced water burdens (Fisher, 2006).

In Ethiopia time spent collecting water from a WUG managed source resulted in improved family relationships. Women spent less time collecting water and more time with the family. This led directly to reduced tensions with children and husbands (Blagborough, 2001).

Information showing the impacts of inclusion in WUG's on women within communities, including case studies.

**Impacts**

- **Access**
  - Women help choose sites for water sources where they are more accessible - with quicker collection times, less harassment and more security. The women have greater privacy and more dignity.

- **Education**
  - Women in WUGs can have a dramatic effect on education as evidence suggests that girls' school attendance is directly related to water collection burdens.

- **Income**
  - WUGs improve access to WASH, which consequently frees up time which can then be spent in paid work. WUGs also improve technical training which increases economic capacity.

- **Sustainability**
  - Water source still provides suitable quality and quantity. Women ensure maintenance and also ensure their health is maintained if the community.

- **Relationships**
  - WUGs improve household relationships through gender sensitisation, reducing tensions over water collection times and increasing time spent in the home.

- **Maintenance**
  - Facilities are kept to a better standard and repaired when needed when women are responsible. Women are also better at collecting funds for repairs.

- **In Pakistan**
  - Men would not allow women to participate in WUGs and were coming up with very expensive solutions to meet the demand for water. After a year the organisation working in the village managed to persuade the men to allow women to get involved and the women came up with a very cost-effective, logical proposal to build a water tank on unused land to supply water to the non-working pipes. This solution proved highly successful and changed the lives of the entire community by providing easy, safe access to water within the village (UN Water, 2006).

- **In Niger**
  - Trying to raise funds for water pump repairs is traditionally difficult and unsuccessful in villages with male WUG treasurers; but in one village where women were working as treasurers, community responsibility initiatives were adopted within the community and women efficiently collected payments from villagers (Fong, Wakeman, & Bhushan, 1996).

- **Water and Sanitation projects**
  - Are more sustainable, and more efficient, when women actively participate (UN Water, 2006).
Indicators

Indicators measure the impact of a project and provide evidence that it is meeting its objectives. Below are some examples of useful indicators for projects aiming to increase women’s participation in WUGs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Sensitisation</td>
<td>Activity Attendance</td>
<td>% of community men and women present at Gender Mainstreaming Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education and Awareness</td>
<td>% of men and women educated in opposite gender WASH needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>% of men and women present at Water Scheme Management Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of men and women present at WUG Management Training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>% of community men and women present at WUG meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WUG roles</td>
<td>Number of decision-making roles within WUG filled by women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution</td>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td>Number of contributions to WUG meetings made by women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adoption</td>
<td>Number of decisions adopted from women’s contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>WASH Maintenance</td>
<td>Decrease in amount of time taken until maintenance activities completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-WASH tasks</td>
<td>Increase in proportion of time spent in non-WASH tasks by women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Relationships</td>
<td>Increase in proportion of time spent with family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Increase in average female income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Increase in number of girls in education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

This guidance has provided advice on the key considerations which enable the successful inclusion of women in Water User Groups.