

Promoting gender equality through better water and sanitation services

Women and girls primarily bear the responsibility for household water supply and child care, and are the most affected by poor sanitation.

The amount of time spent locating and collecting water represents a major barrier to economic gain and empowerment as it reduces time available for income-generating activities and school attendance.

The lack of hygienic, gender-friendly toilets in communities and schools makes it hard for women and girls to manage their menstrual hygiene needs, forcing girls to miss school during menstruation or to drop out altogether. Traveling long distances to collect water or use shared toilets also makes them vulnerable to harassment or violence, increasing the risk of assault.

Although a major reason behind gender inequality in developing countries is the lack of economic empowerment for women, there are also complex cultural attitudes hindering progress. WSUP's experience is that urban water, sanitation, and hygiene programmes can and should extend beyond the provision of better services towards addressing wider issues of gender inequality.

We do this by promoting women's representation in positions of leadership, and their participation in the local economy; by working to reform attitudes towards gender; and supporting local service providers to develop gender-inclusive policies and strategies. WSUP's aim is to create an environment in which women can strive for genuine economic and social equality.



Image: A woman uses new sanitation facilities in Kalshi slum, Dhaka, Bangladesh. **Credit:** GMB Akash

Key facts

- Approximately three quarters of households in sub-Saharan Africa fetch water from sources away from their home; 50-85% of the time, women are responsible for this task.¹
- The additional risks faced by women and children of sexual violence can be reduced by 30% if women are involved in WASH planning.²
- Since inception, WSUP has provided improved water and sanitation services to over seven million women and girls in Africa and South Asia.

¹ <http://www.unwater.org/water-facts/gender/>

² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/536c4ee8e4b0b60bc6ca7c74/1/56f41cee2fe131a7e0b9651c/1458838767309/Achieving+gender+equality+through+WASH+-+April+2016.pdf>

Driving sector change with gender-inclusive services

Providing gender-sensitive water and sanitation infrastructure

We take a gender sensitive approach towards the provision of water and sanitation infrastructure and services, taking into account the specific needs of women and girls.

This work involves putting a particular focus on giving women and girls a voice, and incorporating their recommendations into designs for sanitation blocks and water facilities.

Promoting gender transformative approaches

In order to address some of the underlying reasons behind gender inequality, women and girls need to feel empowered, and we need to reform the social attitudes that increase their vulnerability.

WSUP encourages women's participation and leadership in service providers and community groups. We build the capacity of women so that they go beyond mere participation and are empowered to influence key decisions within their community.

We focus on improving women's access to economic opportunities, through their direct involvement in the operations and management of water and sanitation facilities.

And thirdly, we challenge taboos and gender norms by raising awareness about menstrual hygiene, which in many cultures has a stigma attached to it; by encouraging women's employment in the management and construction of water and sanitation facilities, a typically male-dominated sector; and by pro-actively engaging men to act as champions for gender equality.

Supporting service providers to develop gender inclusive policies and services

Real progress towards gender-inclusive water, sanitation, and hygiene will not be possible without political will and clear commitment from service providers to institutionalise the principles of gender equity.

WSUP works closely with service providers, such as utilities and municipal authorities, to achieve this.



"When I got the kiosk I went for training. We were taught bookkeeping, we were taught how to talk to customers. It helps the kids and it helps the community."

Elizabeth Wambui, water kiosk operator, Naivasha, Kenya
Our work to improve water access in Naivasha has been supported by The Coca-Cola Africa Foundation and the UK Department for International Development.

Between 2016 and 2020, we aim to support 17 million people, of whom approximately 50% will be women and girls. To support this work, we need to raise £65 million. To discuss how we can work together, please contact us at partnerships@wsup.com or call us on +44 (0)20 7822 1867.

Example: Establishing communal sanitation blocks in Maputo

In Maputo, Mozambique, WSUP has supported the provision of communal sanitation blocks - facilities which can serve 10-30 households.

In addition to providing these users with toilets and washing facilities, each block has a water standpost which is open to paying members of the public.

The exact location for the blocks was informed by community meetings, in which over 80% of participants were women. Special focus groups were organised to consider the best way to cater for women and girls' menstrual hygiene needs.

When the project moved on to construction, men and women volunteers worked together at every step. Around half of the participants on the management committee are women, ensuring women's needs continue to be taken into account.

Example: Economic empowerment in Lusaka's Misisi Compound

WSUP has implemented a water improvement project in Misisi which involved the laying of 12km of water supply network, the rehabilitation of 14 water kiosks, construction of 15 open and 20 closed water kiosks and training of 45 water vendors.

Rosemary Chirwa, aged 64, is one of the water vendors trained under the project. She had previously been unable to earn an income, but since becoming a water vendor she had been able to earn a stable income - earning a commission of 40% of total water sales - which helps her buy food for the family and school books and uniform for her children.

Example: Gender strategy for Nairobi City Water & Sewerage Company (NCWSC)

In Kenya, we have supported NCWSC in devising a gender and disability strategy which incorporates both customer-facing and internal components. In addition to strengthening the provision of gender-friendly services, NCWSC's organisational target is now to achieve 30% female staff.

More widely in Kenya, we have advocated at a County Government level for gender-equitable policy adjustments - for example, that before construction latrines should require the approval of District Public Health Officers, who monitor inclusivity criteria.