

Women working in sanitation in Kenya: Evidence gaps

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Quick read...

- Despite evidence that equal gender representation at managerial levels can increase firm performance and the quality of services provided, women are still under-represented in sanitation governance globally and in Kenya.
- Numerous barriers to advancement exist at various stages, from a bias against women training in STEM fields to hostile work environments that discourage advancement.
- Significant gaps remain in the literature on women working and progressing in sanitation and other technical fields.

Rationale

Gender inequity at the level of policy, regulation and management can perpetuate inequities throughout the sanitation sector, limiting the voice and participation of women decision-makers. We analyse the internal workings of organisations that make and implement sanitation policy, regulation and services to: (1) identify the barriers that women face in attaining decision-making roles in sanitation-related public bodies in Kenya and (2) analyse whether female leaders have differential attitudes towards use and access of sanitation facilities.

Urban Sanitation Research Initiative Kenya

This report is produced under the Urban Sanitation Research Initiative Kenya, a 2017-2020 programme of rigorous research designed to drive pro-poor sector change in urban sanitation in Kenya. www.wsup.com/research

Objectives

As part of the study, we have compiled a literature review, focusing on 4 thematic areas, chosen to provide context, fill in gaps and help us develop our questionnaire:

1. **Women in decision-making roles and executive management:** Gain insights on the channels through which diversity in management translates into performance and the challenges women face in these roles.
2. **Gender inequity in sanitation governance:** Informs on the initiatives that have been undertaken to promote meaningful participation of women in WaSH sector and to assess where Kenya stands in the global frame of things.
3. **Barriers to female leadership in technical fields:** Insights on barriers that women face technical roles to serve as a starting point to identify problems that women leaders in Kenya might be facing.
4. **Gender roles and relations in Kenya:** Study of gender roles and relations to understand how socio-cultural norms affect gender inequity in sanitation.

Method

The literature review is built from five sources:

- **Search engines such as Google Scholar, JSTOR:** Primary search for resources based on key words for each of the thematic area.
- **Journals:** Keyword search in relevant journals identified for each of the thematic areas.
- **Gray literature:** Policy briefs, reports and studies conducted by influential NGOs and multi-lateral organizations working in sanitation and gender equity.
- **Experts:** Identification of extensively published researchers, if any, for each thematic area and conducting author search for all relevant literature.
- **Ancestry and descendancy searches:** Tracking citations and seminal papers to identify additional potential literature.

Findings

Women in decision-making roles and executive management:

- Overarching evidence shows a positive impact of female leadership on firm performance.
- Female leadership may make firms more participative and less prone to bribery and corruption.
- Women are evaluated more harshly, face more criticism and get less credit for their success, leading to the 'glass cliff' effect: on average women are more likely to be assigned jobs that have a greater risk of failure.

Gender inequity in sanitation governance:

- Absence of female leaders in the sector might lead to products and services that are inconsiderate of the unique needs and socio-cultural norms and result in failed interventions and perpetuation of gender inequities.
- Targeted policies and programmes that address gender inequities seek to increase the representation of women in the WaSH sector but the number of women in sanitation governance still remains very low.
- Female leaders represent diverse viewpoints, enabling service providers to provide better services.

Barriers to female leadership in technical fields:

- Institutional barriers include absence of female mentors; limited work flexibility; hostile work environment; microaggressions; sexual harassment; and unclear and biased recruitment, placement and advancement policies
- Some part of the missing female leadership can be traced back to low participation rate of girls in STEM education. Women make up less than a quarter of STEM professionals in Africa.
- Technical sectors are considered to be culturally 'male' fields; women and men in these field have equal capabilities but are not perceived as such.

Gender roles and relations in Kenya:

- The Gender Principle mandates that national and legislative assemblies should be made up of no more than two thirds of any gender. It also has a gender policy for education and a policy of rewarding 30% of public contracts to women and youth.
- Women make up a major proportion of the labour force in food production, but only 1% hold registered title deeds. In the formal sector, men's incomes are 55% more than those of women, on average.
- There is equitable level of primary education but the gap widens at the tertiary level.
- Women's political participation is restricted. Only 9% of the elected representatives in the 2017 national elections were women.

Evidence gaps

1. There is **limited literature on diversity in board room representation** in Africa.
2. The **literature on gendered WaSH focuses on women as beneficiaries**, not decision-makers, and is skewed towards water, not sanitation.
3. There is nascent literature on institutional and socio-cultural barriers that are **specific to female employees in technical fields**.

Next steps

This literature review was completed as part of a research project analysing the internal workings of organisations that contribute to and implement sanitation services and policy in Kenya, focusing on: Ministry of Water, Sanitation & Irrigation, Water Services Regulatory Board, Kiambu County Water Department, Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company, Kenya Water Institute and the Water Sector Trust Fund. The next stage of the research is to assess (a) the gender balance in decision-making/technical roles in these organisations; (b) how attitudes to sanitation vary between male and female decision-makers; (c) and the key barriers to female participation in these roles. This will lead to recommendations for equitable recruitment, placement and career advancement of women.

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Credits: This research was commissioned under the Urban Sanitation Research Initiative Kenya and conducted by Athena Infonomics, (lead: Zachary Burt). For the full literature review, see https://www.wsup.com/content/uploads/2020/01/Extensive-Literature-Review_Aug2019.pdf

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