

**irc**

international reference centre  
for community water supply  
and sanitation

who collaborating centre

**cir**

centre international de référence  
pour l'approvisionnement  
en eau collective et l'assainissement

centre collaborant de l'oms

**WOMEN, WATER AND SANITATION : PRACTICAL ISSUES OF PARTICIPATION**  
A Discussion Paper Mary Boesveld

---

"Special efforts are needed to identify women's needs and to recruit their participation in water project activities. Priority should be given to train women in technical and managerial skills for project development, operation and maintenance, health and education. Awareness building and exchange of information regarding water projects development should centre on the crucial role of women in providing basic needs for their families."

This quotation is taken from the conclusions of the Interregional Symposium on Improved Efficiency in the Management of Water Resources, held in New York in January 1987.

Since the beginning of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981 - 1990) National Governments as well as donor agencies have put increasing emphasis on community participation in water supply and sanitation projects. Until quite recently, however, it was unusual to involve women in such projects. The PSWS project was unusual in this way : it stressed the importance of women's participation. In most cases women tended to be considered only as end-users and consumers; seldom as planners, decision-makers and operators, or as educators, who could have a positive influence in the use and maintenance of systems. This paper is not concerned with general issues of community participation; these will be extensively covered in other contributions to the workshop. The focus is here, firstly, on some important reasons why women should be involved in water supply and sanitation projects. Secondly, some measures will be shown on how their involvement can be achieved in different stages of the project cycle.

**1. Why involve women ?**

1.1. In large parts of the world, including Africa, women are responsible for the supply of water for the household. This responsibility has several consequences:

- \* women decide where to collect water for various purposes and in various seasons, how much water to collect and how to use it. Thus, their opinions and needs should be taken into account when new water supplies are designed and implemented.

202.1-89W0-13437

Exclusion of women from planning and implementation of water projects may result in schemes and designs which are not suited to their needs and therefore unacceptable or inaccessible to them.

- \* women's responsibility for water supply for the household may also mean that they will also be responsible for payment of water, in case the new supply makes financial contributions necessary. It is therefore important to assess the willingness and the ability of women to pay for water in planning any water project. Special attention should be given to widows, divorced and single women with children, who often are very poor and may for that reason be excluded from use of the new facilities.
- \* the provision of water, carrying it home often over great distances, takes a lot of time and energy. Easier access of water may result in time saved for women to be spent on other productive activities. Or the quantity of water consumed by households may increase, which usually has beneficial effects on health and hygiene. Women's perception, beliefs and attitudes towards water quantity and quality and their opportunities to benefit from a new water supply system need to be carefully evaluated and discussed with them in the planning stage of any water project.

1.2. Traditionally women often have a role in maintenance and management of community water supplies. For example, in rural areas in Zambia women or women's groups may be responsible for the upkeep and general cleanliness of village wells. They may exert influence on male community leaders to help with major construction tasks or to find new solutions for water problems.

When water supplies function badly or break down, women are the ones most directly affected. They are therefore the ones most motivated to keep the system functioning. It follows logically that in implementing any water supply project it has great advantages to train women to perform management, maintenance and repair tasks. This has for example been the case in Angola, resulting in a marked decrease in the number of repairs and generally in a better functioning of the system.

1.3. Caring for health of the family and for hygiene in the household are important traditional tasks of women. These responsibilities should be expressed and emphasized in their involvement in water supply and sanitation projects.

- \* It is generally recognized that health and hygiene education might help women to increase their understanding of the relationship between water, sanitation and family health. However, more instruction on "do and don't" will not change hygienic and health practices which have existed for generations and for which often valid reasons - practical as well as cultural - exist. To achieve a good result with health education, it is necessary to investigate these practices and reasons first, and to make women's existing knowledge part of the health education programme.
- \* Apart from education, women might need actual help with finding practical solutions for problems of water storage, water drainage, clothes washing, bathing and waste disposal. Appropriate facilities should always be planned and designed in direct discussion with the women who are going to use them. Assisting women to prevent water and sanitation related diseases not only increases well-being but also reduces health costs to the family and the national economy.
- \* Involvement of women in the introduction of sanitation and the installation of latrines is very important. If they are motivated to use these facilities and to educate and train their children to use them, they will make a considerable contribution to health improvement. Also, upkeep and repair of latrines are usually the responsibility of women. Therefore, their needs and opinions should be taken into account in the design of appropriate models and in choosing acceptable sites.

## **2. How to involve women in different stages of the project cycle ?**

### **2.1. Pre-planning stage**

In this stage usually information is collected to facilitate project planning. It will be necessary to design preparatory research in such a way that enough attention is paid to the special roles and traditional tasks and knowledge of women. Also the fact that women and men often give quite different answers to the same questions should be taken into account - "household answers" will never do. Often women need to be interviewed separately by a woman interviewer to make sure that they can speak their mind and their expertise is tapped.

To facilitate all project activities, it might be profitable to secure membership in the project team of one or more female staff members, who have experience with promoting the participation of women in development projects. Also, a first assessment may be made of formal or informal, traditional women's organisations who could support the involvement of women in a water and sanitation project.

#### 2.2. Planning stage

Participation of women in planning and design of a water and sanitation project can be facilitated in various ways :

- by explaining to local leaders why their involvement is needed;
- by informing women through the various local communication channels about forthcoming project meetings and stimulating their attendance;
- by holding meetings at times and places women can attend;
- by organizing meetings in such a way that women can speak out.

Women's membership of committees is enhanced by having them choose their own candidates and by having more than one woman on the committee. In some cases special leadership training for women may be needed.

#### 2.3. Implementation stage

Women should be involved in design choices that are important for the success of the project, such as the choice of technology, level of service, source selection and siting of taps, design of washing facilities, latrine models, etc, and type of financing. This involvement can be achieved through study of their needs and opinions and through discussions between project staff and groups of women.

Women may also be involved in construction of water supply and sanitation, usually as unskilled labourers. More important is their involvement in health and hygiene communication and education. For this also it is necessary to choose a suitable time and place for meetings or discussions. In designing a programme, women's perceptions and knowledge about health and hygiene problems should be taken into account. Local nurses and other primary health care employees could be motivated to take part in the programme. This may help to secure the continuation of good habits and improvements after the project.

#### 2.4. Maintenance stage

For the ultimate success of any water supply project it is very important to involve women in maintenance and management. Usually it is necessary to have good training in simple repairs for caretakers and in simple bookkeeping for managers or treasurers of water committees. Involvement of

women in these tasks will be promoted by offering this training specifically for women, and by setting up a good monitoring system for caretakers and managers or treasurers.

#### 2.5. Evaluation stage

As involvement of women in all stages and aspects of water supply and sanitation projects is relatively new, it would be good practice to evaluate projects specifically on this issue. Ideally, local women or a women's group should be consulted about what would be important to evaluate, and they should be involved in data collection and analysis. In any case, female project staff members should be involved in the evaluation research.

---

### References

Community Participation and Women's Involvement in Water Supply and Sanitation Projects. "A Compendium Paper". IRC, International Water and Sanitation Centre, The Hague, August 1988.

Connecting Women, Water and Sanitation.  
in : INSTRAW News, Santo Domingo, no. 8, Spring/Summer 1987, pp.19-23.

Women and Water.  
in : ISIS, Women's World WICCE, Geneva, no. 10. June 1986, pp.38-43.

Christine van Wijk - Sijbesma, Participation of Women in Water Supply and Sanitation. Roles and Realities.  
IRC, The Hague, 1985 (Technical Paper 22).

Christine van Wijk - Sijbesma, Women's Roles in Water and Latrine Projects.  
in : VENA Newsletter, Leiden, Vol.0, no.0, November 1988, pp.18-20.