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The Need for Women Involvement in Water and Sanitation Schemes

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ABSTRACT

Water is very important to the body, as it is used in every cell of the human body. Apart from the critical role played by water in the human body, water is also a major aspect of human growth and development. This is seen in the fact that, water has always being a key driver of sustainable growth and poverty alleviation, being an input to almost all production, in agriculture, industry, energy, transport. Access to safe water increases economic returns. Accordingly, improving household water access impacts household finances and ultimately, the economy at a macro level. More so, access to safe water and a toilet at home can reduce a family's health care expenses. Nevertheless, even though there are several studies and forums on women's involvement in water and sanitation for over decades now, in reality women have not been as active in the sector as one would have expected. This paper examined some factors responsible for the low level of involvement and makes suggestions on how this can be improved. It concluded that although women need to work alongside men in rural water and sanitation projects, men should first of all be made to appreciate the crucial role of women in order for them to fashion out appropriate strategies to involve their women counterparts effectively. The involvement of the women should be facilitated by social workers who have to ensure that outside workers do not disturb the socio-cultural milieu where the women live and operate. Lastly, the women should not be addressed in isolation but as part of the complete network of relations of rural societies.

Keywords: Women, Challenges, Water, Sanitation and Mobilisation

INTRODUCTION

The value of water can be said to be embodied in the saying that 'water is life.' According to experts, water is ranked second only to oxygen as essential for life. With more than half of the human body weight made of water, humans cannot survive for more than a few days without it. Water is very important to the body, as it is used in every cell of the human body. Apart from the critical role played by water in the human body, water is also a major aspect of human growth and development. This is seen in the fact that, water has always being a key driver of sustainable growth and poverty alleviation, being an input to almost all production, in agriculture, industry, energy, transport. Access to safe water increases economic returns. Accordingly, improving household water access impacts household finances and ultimately, the economy at a macro level. For instance, access to safe water and a toilet at home can reduce a family's health care expenses. Nevertheless, even though there are several studies and forums on women's involvement in water and sanitation for over decades now, in reality women have not been as active in the sector as one would have expected. The paper aims to examine some factors responsible for the low level of involvement and makes suggestions on how this can be improved.

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The Level of Women's Participation during Project Stages

Design

During the design of water and sanitation facilities, it is important to involve women because they are the ones who would use the facilities more than men and pass on the practice to children. It is necessary that concerns of women are taken cognizance of during the design, feasibility studies and pilot-testing stage of projects. For water projects, some of these include ease of fetching or pumping water, ease and cost of maintenance of systems, availability of spares etc. In the case of sanitation, height of pedestal, type of seat, size and type of enclosure, lighting, location and orientation need to be considered. These are issues that make all the difference between use and non-use of facilities [1]. The goal at this design stage should be that of coming out with appropriate technologies that take into consideration the views of women who would eventually use the facilities most and pass on the practice to children. While design of pipes and pumps should be robust, they should be easy and convenient to use and repair and with sanitation, the latrines should be low-cost and convenient to use by the rural folk, especially the women and elderly.

Promotion Stage

After projects have been designed and approved, they are often "sold" to the public or intended beneficiaries. The idea at this stage is to convince people to accept the project. If women are to use the facilities, then it would be improper for them to be ignored at this stage. Without proper information and sensitization, the numbers of women at community meetings are always low when the domestic involvement and chores of women at the home front are not taken cognizance of. Promotional messages should help community members to address problems and challenges associated with the use of improper sanitation and polluted water. Poor access to information leads to non-acceptance of water and sanitation facilities by relatively poor women in places like Tanzania, India, Philippines and Tonga.

One positive suggestion in solving the problem of involving women at this stage is to use women professionals and extension service workers as front-line workers. When rural women listen to or receive information from women professionals and extension workers, it has a number of positive impacts on them, not least is how it makes the rural women identify better with the workers and the opening up of avenues for them to air their views and share problems as well as identify solutions to common problems. Women, after listening to their women counterparts pass on information to them, are more likely to impress upon their male counterparts to agree to accept water and sanitation projects for a number of reasons. These include easing their burdens, improving their status and prestige, offering them convenience and privacy (especially for sanitation projects), safety and better health. In some parts of Kenya, while in-laws have to use separate latrines, sharing of sanitation facilities is not encouraged for both sexes in parts of Bangladesh, South Korea, Tanzania, Malawi and Swaziland. A typical case of women passing on information to their colleagues as a result of having listened to their fellow women was experienced during the UNDP rural water and Sanitation project in Ghana after a women's sensitization workshop was organized for women Water and Sanitation (WATSAN) committee representatives. All the facilitators of the workshop were women professionals and this went a long way to galvanise the rural women.

Mobilisation

Often when communities have accepted to become beneficiaries of water and sanitation projects, owing to concepts such as community ownership and management and decentralized maintenance of facilities, there is the need for further extension services to be carried out in communities. This entails the formation of local institutions that would be responsible for the management of the facilities, often referred to as water and sanitation (WATSAN) committees. Women are often reluctant to join and take up positions in these institutions basically because of local beliefs, customs and opinions that they are inferior, a notion they have accepted unconsciously. Women also discourage their fellow women from taking part in such organizations while others also consider their involvement in such organisations as adding to their already heavily-loaded domestic and other chores. Women play multiple roles such as wives, individuals, workers outside the home as well as members of the community [2]. By the age of 18 years, most rural women have at least one child and combining their responsibilities to children, husbands, home of origin and others inhibit their effective involvement in such projects. In some cases, the men see the involvement of women in such local organizations as a threat to their social status and tend to discourage the women. While it is fair to allow community members to select their own persons or officials to occupy certain positions during local-level activities in respect of water and sanitation issues, it is advisable to help and direct them to appreciate the crucial role and importance of women to such positions. Even though participation of women in such committees is still embryonic and yet to blossom, this can be improved through the use of focus group discussions where women can be encouraged to recognize their importance and positive contribution. It is at this forum that the extension worker can determine the different strategies needed to be adopted to suit different women's groups since women

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are not to be bunched together as one homogeneous mass of people. There could be different roles within the water, sanitation and hygiene education/promotion spheres for the sub-sets of women such as grandmothers, mothers, oldest girl, house-help/maid, teenager, “girl child” etc. women can be helped to become assertive within acceptable socio-cultural limits particularly when those who are handling the software aspects carry out socio-economic surveys and incorporate their findings into design and planning of such projects. women should be encouraged to move away from being mere Treasurers of WATSAN committees where they have been confined to for decades into taking on more executive positions such as Secretaries and chair persons, Financial Secretaries, Caretakers, vendors etc. This however should be based on competence and qualification and not on mere gender equity basis.

A key requirement of many projects during the mobilization stage is the need to raise funds to pay for capital cost contribution of the facilities. Owing to the relatively poor incomes of most rural women, there is a tendency for rural workers to sideline them at this stage. Experience however indicates that most women are not only willing to pay for water (and sanitation) facilities but also possess the ability to pay. They can also encourage their male counterparts to pay for the up-coming facilities and often are prepared to lend support financially in this regard. Another way of encouraging women to make contributions to water is to help women to compare some of the things they treasure with a vital commodity like clean water. Examples include cloth or textiles, hair products, foot-wear, out-dooring and marriage ceremonies, attendance to festivals, funeral accoutrements etc. with the use of scoring and ranking tools such as the pocket chart, pair-wise ranking and others, women can be assisted to make wise selection and ultimately prioritise their needs. This becomes helpful in communities where the demand for potable water supply has to compete with other necessities like electricity, roads, agricultural inputs, capital for commercial purposes etc. women need assistance sometimes to enable them to make rational decisions. One challenge that women often complain about as inhibiting their active participation in local institutions is illiteracy. The problem can be solved partially through the use of a variety of participatory approaches and tools that are often pictorial. Some examples include the use of the F-diagram, sanitation ladder, story with a gap, three pile sorting cards and others that have been used to great success in many rural water and sanitation projects. Not only has it resulted in encouraging women to participate and improve their confidence during the mobilization stage. It has made their male counterparts realize that wisdom may not necessarily be the preserve of men and that knowledge and wisdom are not the same.

Planning

In the course of planning towards the introduction of water and sanitation projects, women are often side-lined. This is done either by their male counterparts owing to the highly patriarchal nature of most rural communities or by outside agencies. In identifying places for siting of boreholes, hand-dug wells and pipe stands, since it is the women who often fetch the water, it is vital and of absolute necessity to involve them, listen to their opinions, preferences and incorporate them into the technical options for good decisions to be made. In similar vein, identifying places for building sanitation facilities needs to take women’s concerns into consideration. This is because if women do not appreciate the location of these facilities, they are not likely to use them when they are installed [3].

Implementation

In projects that are less manual and require little input from community members such as drilling of boreholes and laying of pipes under small town systems, women are not likely to play significant roles. Even with such projects, it is not out of place for information to be disseminated about activities that have to be carried out. When such information gets to community members, it is the women who often take the lead to receive visitors, technical personnel and construction workers from outside the community. They, in consultation with community leaders, look for where the equipment can be safely kept. Women are ever prepared to offer a helping hand for laying of pipes, carrying of sand, stones and other materials to facilitate and expedite work being done in their communities. The software component of implementation includes activities such as offering user-education of the water and sanitation facilities, carrying out basic hygiene education to community members, ensuring cleanliness of pump sites or pipe stands, rendering of regular accounts to community members, opening and closing of pipes/pumps, fetching water and ensuring hand-washing with soap at critical times for children. Others include water vending or collecting money for water used and accounting to community of water sold or revenue collected, ensuring food-vendor hygiene, cleaning and sweeping of drains, soak-away pits and household as well as public latrines, clearing and burning of refuse etc. it would be realised that most of these activities are spearheaded and done by women and not men. It has been realised that in many households in rural communities that are headed by women, the impact of women on their children can be far-reaching and beneficial to water and sanitation projects as has been experienced in Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Jamaica. Others could be the use of influential leaders to reach rural women and other women’s associations, traditional birth attendants, community health nurses, wives of traditional, political and religious leaders etc. Such women can help in the successful implementation of rural water and sanitation

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projects. Some of the strategies that can be made to improve active participation of women are to utilize existing resources, reduce prejudice, design informal educational programmes that use more non-formal means and most of all get the men to appreciate the paramount importance of women at this stage. If the men come to terms with what could happen without the active role of women at the stage of implementation, they may end up offering their support to their women counterparts.

Follow-up/Monitoring and evaluation

At the time of follow-up, when emphasis is placed on monitoring and evaluation, women have been known to play vital roles again. Because they use the water and sanitation facilities on a daily basis, women are able to discern aspects of the projects that are oblivious to the men. Water quality issues from ground water such as excess iron, fluoride, manganese and the like and their impacts are noticed early by women before men. Others include the performance of pumps, state of reservoirs, pipelines and valves, among others [4]. Women are also more eager to contribute towards operation and maintenance and user-education of facilities more than men because they know and can imagine the consequences if the facilities break down without alternative mechanisms for repair. Since most rural women belong to voluntary associations and church/religious-based organizations, co-operatives, mothers' clubs etc, it is suggested that extension workers use such avenues for education programmes to help to ensure sustainability of such projects i.e. after post-project activities.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

Without adequate, safe and affordable water, billions of people around the globe will be unable to lead healthy lives and will lack the ability to build secure livelihoods. Hence, although women need to work alongside men in rural water and sanitation projects, men should first of all be made to appreciate the crucial role of women in order for them to fashion out appropriate strategies to involve their women counterparts effectively. The involvement of the women should be facilitated by social workers who have to ensure that outside workers do not disturb the socio-cultural milieu where the women live and operate. The women should not be addressed in isolation but as part of the complete network of relations of rural societies.

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