



WASH and Gender

Access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services is crucial for every woman, man, girl, and boy. Gender relations and roles directly influence access to WASH knowledge and practices. In light of women's traditional role as stewards of water; their reproductive and menstrual health needs, caring responsibilities, vulnerability to gender-based violence, access to water, and sanitation are of utmost importance. This Tool provides guidance on how to tackle gender inequality in WASH and use WASH interventions to spark broader transformational change toward gender equality.

Gender Issues Related to WASH

As primary caregivers for their families in most parts of the world, women and girls bear a disproportionate amount of responsibility for WASH-related activities. Water fetching and managing community-based sanitation facilities are among the main unpaid tasks traditionally expected to be performed by women. These occupational burdens have a strong socio-economic impact on women and girls, as they limit their opportunities to further education and to participate in productive and leisure activities. In sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls carry water containers for an average of 5 km per day to fetch water ([WaterAid, 2019](#)). This physical strain and lack of adequate WASH services results in a severe health burden for women and girls, causing them to suffer from back problems, water born and infectious diseases. Mothers and newborns in particular remain vulnerable to poor sanitation conditions and water quality, which cause many infectious diseases and have a significant impact on child undernutrition, maternal mortality, and preventable child deaths. WASH is thus crucial for public health and social development – since in most societies women bear the main burden of caring for the sick.

A Gender Take on WASH Decision-Making Structures

Since women shoulder the main responsibility for WASH-related activities in everyday life, they have often acquired knowledge about water management and common customs and challenges within the community. However, there is often reluctance to see women emerging from their traditional, non-public roles into public and technical fields for which they are considered unqualified and unsuitable. A study from 2014 reports that the proportion of women professionals in the formal WASH sector was only 17% in 15 surveyed African, South, and Southeast Asian countries ([IWA, 2014](#)). The fact that most water utility technical staff are men, including pump mechanics, causes problems whereby only men have the ability to fix a borehole or construct a toilet while women are those that are most

affected by it. This is not only an untapped resource, but participation is key to claiming rights – and access to water and sanitation are fundamental human rights. Empowering women to lead while making space for leadership positions increases the effectiveness and sustainability of projects and decision-making and improves health and service delivery for all. Putting women’s meaningful participation at the core of decision-making processes at every level of design, implementation and monitoring of the WASH ecosystem drives gender equality efforts forward.

Linking Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and WASH

Women are put at risk of harassment and sexual and gender-based violence by the overall lack of gender-sensitive WASH facilities as well as having to travel long distances for water every day (IASC, 2015). The location of and access to water sources as well as latrines can be a significant factor affecting women's use of the facility due to safety and privacy concerns. Women are also disproportionately impacted by humanitarian disasters and fragile contexts, where water resources along with sanitation facilities are often contaminated or devastated and gender-based violence increases. For WASH being a pathway to gender equality, it requires water and sanitation systems to be safe, available, and accessible for all without discrimination.

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)

A major challenge related to WASH and gender is menstrual hygiene management. Poor access to gender-sensitive sanitation facilities limit the ability of women and girls to manage their menstruation hygienically and in a safe and private environment. Prevailing taboos prevent girls from attending school at all during their period causing poorer future prospects for every affected girl. Access to gender-sensitive sanitation facilities and hygiene measures are critical for ensuring healthy menstrual hygiene management, including lowering the risk of bacterial infections. This involves thinking of designing water supply and sanitation infrastructure that, for example, allows for more and covered space inside the latrine, available water inside the latrine to wash, and places where to dispose period products.

Practical Approaches to Mainstreaming Gender in WASH

There are several open access gender-related toolkits and manuals for different contexts and WASH branches such as, among others:

- **“Menstrual hygiene matters”**: It is a comprehensive and innovative resource for practitioners funded by SHARE and WaterAid that entails both a comprehensive resource book (House et al., 2012) as well as a practical training guide (Mahon and Cavill, 2012). The resource book compiles nine modules accompanied by nine associated toolkits that bring together knowledge and practice on menstrual hygiene programming from around the world. The training guide provides eight session plans that cover: the introduction, an icebreaker, menstrual hygiene basics, menstrual hygiene materials, barrier analysis, solution analysis, communicating confidently, and

designing a menstrual hygiene intervention. The guide walks the facilitator through the group sessions offering time schedules, material lists, methodologies, session outlines, and case studies.

- **“Violence, Gender & WASH: A Practitioner’s Toolkit”**: WaterAid and SHARE published a high-level and comprehensive practitioner’s toolkit together with the contributions of a wide range of organisations to make WASH safer through improved programming and services ([House et al. 2014](#)). The practitioner’s toolkit is based on 10 principles to be considered in all WASH institutions and programmes to reducing vulnerabilities to violence linked to WASH and provides the necessary material to initiate actions that have the potential to reduce these vulnerabilities. The toolkit is composed of briefing notes and 8 different toolsets: case studies, videos, checklists, training scenarios, methodologies, legal instruments.
- **“Gender and WASH Monitoring Tool”**: The Gender and WASH Monitoring Tool by Plan International ([Leong et al., 2018](#)) is a simple tool promoting and measuring change in gender relations in WASH interventions at household and community level. It is directed at local project implementation staff and partners as it comprises preparatory training prior to the activities as well as a set of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) activities. The aim is to raise awareness in the community about gender roles and relations in WASH-related tasks, create space for discussion, and strengthen their own aspirations for change towards gender equality. The tool offers concrete templates for group activities with men and women and goes through all the preparation and implementation steps to support the facilitator.
- **“Ideas That Work: A gender, WASH and emergencies toolkit”**: To help WASH practitioners gain an understanding of what beneficial gender outcomes can look like, an Oxfam publication ([Rangaswami, 2010](#)) presents six case studies to showcase “ideas that work” to prevent violence against women through water and sanitation interventions in early emergency response. These six case studies range from the need to provision toilets to preventing violence in internally displaced person camps.

WASH as Pathway for Gender-Equal Societies

WASH can be an effective entry point to build the capacity of national and local government in responding to the needs of women and girls. Funding should reflect this ([Tool D1.06](#)). Investments in WASH drastically reduce unpaid workloads for women and girls and contribute to generating capacity for participation in schools, paid work, political engagement and more. In this sense, if gender equality is taken into account in policies and programmes, women's standing will improve, and their well-being will become a major concern.

WASH should be in the forefront of international women's rights advocacy and gender transformative approaches considered in large-scale decision-making in the water sector – such as investments in infrastructure or water trade. Several position papers strengthen the business case for WASH and show how the sector effectively contributes to overall development outcomes ([WaterAid, 2019](#); [TseTse and Alleman, 2017](#)).

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