

# A gender-inclusive approach in practice: communal sanitation

Women and girls suffer disproportionately from the effects of poor sanitation and lack of access to clean water. Through the example of establishing communal sanitation facilities in Maputo (Mozambique) and Naivasha (Kenya), this Practice Note illustrates how WASH service provision can be approached in a way that fosters inclusion, promotes equality, and places the concerns of women and girls at the centre of programme planning and implementation.



Women working in latrine construction in Naivasha, Kenya

### Context

The gender-specific effects of poor WASH service provision are well documented, and include a wide range of health and socio-economic impacts. Here are just a few examples: inadequate water and sanitation leads to a higher incidence of infectious diseases, which in turn leads to higher maternal mortality rates and worsening reproductive health; in urban districts where it takes a long time to collect water, women often perform this task at the expense of generating income, and girls at the expense of their schooling; poorly maintained sanitation facilities in schools further deter girls from attending, particularly during menstruation; and in communal sanitation, women and girls can suffer from a lack of privacy and security when using facilities. These impacts underline the need to improve urban WASH services in general, but also the measures required to make a particular service effective: unless issues like privacy and security are addressed in the design of WASH facilities, we can expect a huge negative impact on facility usage and on the well-being of the women and girls affected.

### A gender-inclusive approach

In order to ensure that women and girls use and benefit from new services, it is essential for any WASH-implementing organisation to adopt a gender-inclusive approach. But what does that mean in practice? In this note we discuss WSUP's experience of establishing communal sanitation facilities, outlining what an inclusive approach for this type of service might look like. At the community level, this means promoting the meaningful participation of women in the planning, design and siting of facilities to ensure ease of access and use; promoting women's leadership in the management, operation and maintenance of these services; and sensitising men to the importance of gender-related issues. The planned impacts of this approach extend beyond better WASH services, and aim towards the empowerment of women both as decision-makers in the community and as members of the local workforce.

### Introducing Communal Sanitation Blocks

Communal toilets - toilets shared by a defined group of households - can provide an effective form of sanitation in low-income, high-density settlements. Communal toilet characteristics vary according to the nature of the settlement: in places where people live on plots comprising several households (such as Naivasha), WSUP has helped to install *on-plot latrines* situated within a shared compound. In Maputo, WSUP is involved in the provision of *communal sanitation blocks*: these blocks are often situated within the compound being served, but can also be located in a public space between compounds. They serve a defined group of users, typically 10-30 households (around 40-120 people). In addition to providing these users with toilets and washing facilities, each block has a water standpost attached which is open to paying members of the public.

WSUP's experience in supporting the establishment of communal sanitation blocks in Maputo has led to the development of a four-step planning and management process, in which women take a central role. This process is described on the next page.

# Establishing communal sanitation blocks: a four-step process



Women-led construction in Maputo, Mozambique

## Step One: Needs-based siting

The path towards new WASH facilities that people want to use begins with getting the location right. In Maputo, the neighbourhoods that host the blocks were agreed with the Municipality according to pre-specified criteria (for example, the socio-economic status of householders). The exact location for the blocks was informed by a needs assessment led by the local leader (Chefe do Quarteirão), with user preference also a factor. Community meetings were organised to discuss location in which over 80% of participants were women, the high figure resulting from both mobilisation activities and women's greater availability to attend meetings.

## Step Two: Women-led design clinics

In WSUP's Naivasha programme, women were placed at the centre of infrastructure design through the use of *toilet design clinics*: women-only focus groups with the added participation of project planners and engineers. Community meetings were organised in Maputo towards the same goal, women the majority but not sole participants. A number of shared outcomes were implemented as a result of these sessions, including separate cubicles for men and women; locking the toilets at night but making the key available to users; and a separate space for washing clothes. A continued challenge in Maputo is the disposal of menstrual waste materials: disposal of sanitary pads in bins remains a cultural taboo in the local context, and the common habit of disposing to the toilet makes emptying the pit or septic tank more difficult. Special focus groups have been organised (in both communities and in schools) to find solutions to this complex issue.

## Step Three: Women-led construction

In devising sustainable finance arrangements for WASH facilities, one option is for the community to contribute labour by helping to construct the facilities. In Maputo, men and women volunteers worked together at every step from initial excavation to loading the blocks, with women the majority in the teams undertaking construction. These voluntary efforts have transitioned into paid roles in Naivasha, where women such as Alice Wanjiru (pictured overleaf) have joined the traditionally male-dominated workforce constructing new WASH facilities, countering pre-conceptions that women were not capable of working in the industry.

## Step Four: Women-led management

Women's involvement in the management of WASH facilities is often integral to the sustainability of the service. In the Maputo case, sustainability has been promoted through community ownership of the facilities: the local bairro administration, part of the Municipality, delegates management to a Sanitation Block Management Committee comprised of five elected representatives. By encouraging women to volunteer for positions of leadership the programme has achieved high levels of participation: of the 36 committees so far established, 47% have a woman president, 58% a woman vice-president, and 67% a woman treasurer (in Mafalala bairro women have taken a particularly strong lead, occupying 32 of the 35 committee positions). Women also form the majority of standpost operators, enabling them to benefit economically from the blocks: water is sold at the prescribed social tariff (ensuring it is affordable to low-income customers) but the operator retains a small profit to make their livelihood from the service.

## Conclusion

A gender-inclusive approach is fundamental to the continued usage and maintenance of WASH facilities. By this measure WSUP's carefully planned and implemented approach in Maputo has been successful, with women and girls continuing to use and maintain the communal sanitation blocks four years after installation. This however is only one part of the picture. WSUP's experience demonstrates that the gender-inclusion aims of urban WASH programmes can and should extend beyond the provision of better services: through working to reform attitudes towards gender, by encouraging women to participate in the local economy, and by promoting women's representation in positions of leadership, the aim is to create an environment in which women can strive for genuine economic and social equality.

*The term 'gender inclusiveness' usually implies inclusion of women and girls, but a programme must be careful not to side-line men! Activities in Maputo were accompanied by a community sensitisation campaign, in which the Secretary of the Bairro and Chefe do Quarteirão conducted household visits to discuss gender issues in the local context. Men in the bairros appear to understand the importance of maintaining the blocks, and have generally been supportive of women taking a leading role.*

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