

Addressing gender specific needs vs creating space and opportunity to challenge gender roles and promote gender equality

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A Water programme is often considered a strong candidate for a GG marker 1, meaning that it can have an impact on promoting gender equality and achieve positive changes in gender relations. This stems from the untold assumption (which is a reality in many countries) that women are usually in charge of water related activities and as such, water programmes hold the potential to improve socio economic conditions for women.

That reasoning, for as much as it holds truth, does not imply that a Water programme can actually promote gender equality, but rather that it can improve women's lives within their socially accepted gender roles. It does not entail any challenging of traditional gender roles, but implies the enactment of a gender aware approach throughout the implementation. Sex disaggregated data, recording and monitoring of female specific needs, inclusion of those needs in the program design are all arrows of the gender aware approach bow.

Aiming at promoting gender equality through or within our interventions requires a deep understanding of the structural and contextual drivers of gender inequality and sexual division of tasks. Without that understanding or knowledge, we are likely to remain limited to superficial interventions and thus results. Imposing quota on female representation within committees or institutions might create the room for enhanced female participation but might also lead to a tokenistic representation of females, thereby limiting the possibility for a real dialogue about gender equality or female participation to decision making. Numbers might hide the reality of where the power lies or with whom and create a false impression of equal representation.

No one other than the actors themselves can actually modify and alter the gender dynamics. So while staying humble about our own achievements; we need remain aware that through our actions we can create an enabling environment for the actors, clients, beneficiaries to advance their own agenda. This requires awareness of the gender problem and how it materializes in our context of intervention; without that awareness we might as well miss the opportunity to create or contribute to create that environment.

The Zimbabwe Urban Water and Sanitation Program (UWSP) is fully aware of these different approaches and pitfalls and has established a good understanding of gender dynamics within our context of intervention¹, leading to the development of a gender aware approach along the implementation of activities designed to create the space for equality of opportunity.

A gender aware approach focused on women's needs

The UWSP supports four Zimbabwean cities (Gweru, Kadoma, Chinhoyi and Kariba) in the rehabilitation of their water supply and distribution systems and in the overall management of service delivery while promoting a pro-poor, client-centered approach. Our module objective reads as follows: The cities capacity to ensure water supply and sanitation services are strengthened. At objective level an indicator² - targeting the inclusion of women's needs in the program design and monitoring female consumers' level of satisfaction³ - guides the intervention towards a focus on improving living conditions for women.

¹ Gender Analysis, Baseline and endline studies, qualitative research

² Indicator: A study confirms that the specific needs of women have been taken into account in the program design. Target: on a scale from 1 to 5, the level of satisfaction of female consumers increases by 1 point in 2 towns by the end of the intervention. Source: baseline and endline studies

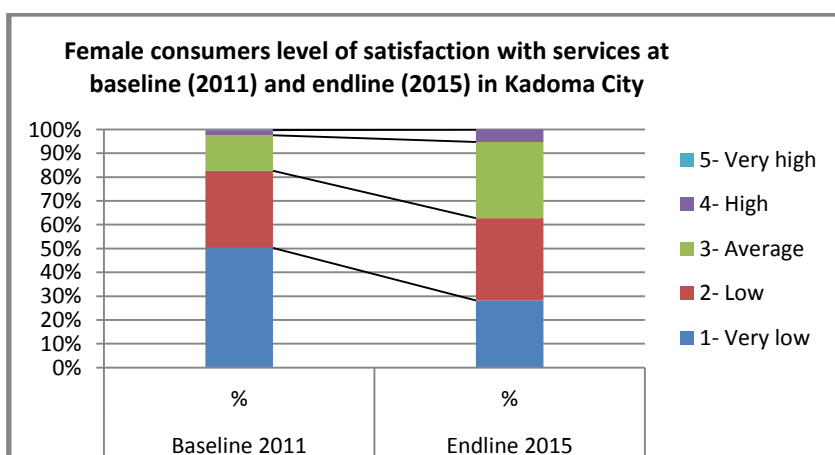
³ The term was unpacked in the initial qualitative research and further disaggregated in various dimensions.

Rehabilitation of the water supply and restoration of basic services in Zimbabwe urban centers benefit the whole population by design (city wide reticulation networks are the standard in urban Zimbabwe), it is therefore not possible to target female headed households or women customers in particular. The improvements in service delivery - when reaching a neighborhood – will equally profit the inhabitants regardless of their social status or gender. Therefore, in order to include possible specific female requirements or needs within the program design, the UWSP undertook to research qualitatively and analyse quantitatively female consumers’ perceptions related to water and sanitation access, and customer services. What females resent more in the lack of service delivery, what inconveniences them the most and what would be the first benefits of improving services was recorded and analysed; comparison with male perceptions was also included. Water related gender roles were also unpacked, confirming that men focus more on technical matters and professional use (construction, welding, water vending) of water and women are in charge of household related water needs and usage (ensuring availability of water at household level for all needs) and more concerned with quality.

Few differences in female and male consumers’ needs were recorded, but we could steer the support to customer services improvement in line with the main inconveniences highlighted by female consumers. Problem areas such as erratic water supply, lack of responsiveness to customer queries, lack of timely attendance to burst pipes and poor reliability of refuse collection services were all of particular concern to women. Female consumers felt they were hindered in the fulfillment of their gender role, the tasks assigned to them were being even more time consuming and their inability to comply with the traditional sexual division of labour was causing tensions within the household, in particular with their husbands and male relatives. What female consumers were expressing here is the need to be supported in conforming to the gender role assigned to them, they were not challenging or requesting support to challenge this dimension of their role.

Interventions targeting improved reliability of refuse collection (through procurement of vehicles, publication of schedule, information to residents on schedule change and possible alternatives...), better responsiveness to customer complaint regarding bursts and leaks (with customer care and technical trainings, provision of service vehicles, spare parts...), and more regular water supply (procurement of pumps, steering of the supply and distribution network, communication to residents in case of water rationing) yielded positive results and the level of satisfaction of female consumers increased by one point (from 1 to 2, on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is very low and 5 is very good) between the beginning of the first phase and the start of the second phase of the program (see graph below).

Results achieved are systematically recorded into the Result Based Monitoring system, studies document the areas where the most significant results have been reached and qualitative research ensures that the “how” we got there together with our partner cities is analysed and detailed.



Creating space for actors to challenge established gender roles and promote gender equality

In addition to the cooperation with Zimbabwean municipalities to improve service provision to residents, the UWSP also responds to partners’ support requests in the rehabilitation of dilapidated and insalubrious parts of the urban habitat.

In Kariba, the municipality solicited financial means and technical advice to improve the sanitation conditions of the oldest part of the city, Mahombekombe. Built in 1953, the area’s lines of one-roomed houses were initially made to accommodate workers building the dam wall on the Zambezi River. Now home to more than 2,000 inhabitants, the communal housing structures are serviced by collective ablution blocks constructed in the same year... (See photo below).

Preparatory studies including thorough consultation with residents were implemented before the project started. Here again, guided by our gender focused approach and informed by our partners and own knowledge of the context, the organization of the consultation process aimed at crossing the cultural gender lines. Consultation on the design, siting and technical features of the new facilities involved men and women, and were done jointly by a social mobilizer and a civil engineer, facilitating communication about matters foreign to many participants. As an alternative to the usual male/female bathroom sections, it was proposed to

give each group of 2 to 3 families a key to one particular set of toilet, shower and sink. This option was chosen by each group of residents.



Ablution block in M/kombe – Vakadzi:female; Varume: male

This new system needed to be tested; the facilities were therefore designed in a way that allows reversing to the male/female sections if preferable to the inhabitants; one year after the completion of the first block, none has taken that option.



Consultation process in M/kombe

This innovative sharing arrangement avoids putting the burden of hygienic maintenance of the facilities on women. Experience showed that it often happens that female users have to clean and maintain males’ section, if not merely for cultural and social reasons, at least to prevent them from using the female part

of the ablutions when theirs has become too inconvenient.

Beyond the greater sense of ownership brought about by this system, users have also commented on the improved privacy, safety and dignity; *“For the first time, we feel comfortable to invite and host visitors, because we have our own toilet* (Mrs. Gandawa, resident in Mahombekombe).



New ablution block in M/kombe, Kariba

Also significantly, residents recorded and mentioned less tension between men and women over the use of the facilities as a positive impact of the sharing system.

This innovation was presented in 2015 at the WASH Cluster and praised for its originality and its potential to be replicated and spread. The Municipality of Kariba is currently planning the extension of the project following the same modalities in other parts of the same neighborhood and will start implementing with UWSP support early 2016; the renovation will have covered the entire population by the end of 2016.

Throughout the project we aimed at creating the possibility for other gender roles if any participant would be willing to take them on. Ablution committees were formed, involving male and female community members equally. The members were trained in all functions, from sanitary to technical maintenance, and coordinated residents' contribution to the works. Women were involved in heavy construction work, initially to the surprise of men, but this involvement made their participation to decision making regarding management of the facilities very legitimate to the eyes of male committee members and they could push their agenda⁴. Men got involved in a sphere that is usually considered a female one, hygiene maintenance, and some of the hygiene committees are headed by male residents, which is an unusual feature in our context.

The modus operandi adopted for the project could open the door for individuals or groups to doing something differently from their assigned gender behavior. This provoked an alteration in gender dynamics around the management of the facilities; the joint decision making helped appease the existing tensions as both male and female users have the opportunity to be heard and taken into account.

The main key to the success of these interventions are the actors themselves, but there are strategic elements that have also contributed to it.

A good knowledge of the general context and the gender situation, available in the program through colleagues and acquired through field work, qualitative research, consultation and discussion with partners, clients and counterparts, but also desktop review and information gathering, is essential. Financial and time investment in social, technical studies and information collection and analysis to inform the program design is a strong feature of the UWSP approach.

A strong relationship with the partner cities, built on trust and common objectives through time and abundant communication and exchange, and where priorities are set jointly. Kariba municipality had initially not prioritized the project despite available support; the Council made a request few months later following a change in planning, and only then was the project designed and set up. The Municipality was the main implementer in collaboration with their residents, and the UWSP facilitated the process and provided technical advice.

Lessons learned analysis and iteration process, within the program team and with partners; so that the project design is always informed by successes and challenges experienced. What did we do wrong is an essential question that we ask ourselves when we review our interventions.

Innovation and out-of-box thinking, which is brought about and stems from the previous key success factors!

⁴ For instance, female residents and committee members wanted to ask for a contribution to the families that had not participated to the works for them to be able to use the facilities. Men committee members were initially opposed but accepted the decision, without trouble.