

## Change the system, not the women!

### The African Women Sanitation Professional's Network – Zambia Chapter: Supporting the growth of women together.

#### Understanding the challenge

Despite Zambia having been part of the Beijing 1995 United Nations conference on women, developing a National Gender Policy in 2014 and formulating several national guidelines and protocols, the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector in the country has undergone limited reforms to enable effective participation of women in operations and service delivery.

Being the primary users of water and sanitation services, women and girls often bear the brunt of sanitation and water crises, since they are the ones who usually manage sanitation facilities and are responsible for the collection of water. Therefore, improving access to drinking water and safe sanitation eases the burden through, for instance, a reduction in waterborne diseases and other health-related income losses.

Women and girls continue to be grossly underrepresented in the sector. Where they are present, their progress is often hindered, and their voices are seldomly heard due to inherent systemic gender inequality. To date, Zambia grapples with the challenge of attracting, recruiting, retaining, and promoting women professionals in the water supply and sanitation sector. Currently, out of the 11 water and sanitation utilities in Zambia, all the Managing Directors are male, and only one out of the 11 Board Chairpersons is female. By failing to recognize the invaluable skills that women bring to the table, the sector has been missing out on crucial perspectives, solutions, and innovations.

#### Innovative solutions to challenges.

In response to these challenges, GIZ through the Reform of the Water Sector Phase II (RWS II) program, supported the establishment of the **African Women Sanitation Professionals' Network – Zambia Chapter (AWSPN – ZC)** in September 2019. The follow-on project, Strengthening Institutions for Sustainable Water Supply and Sanitation in Zambia (SIWaS), is sustaining this partnership, working hand in hand with the network to drive gender-transformative approaches within Zambia's sanitation and water supply sector.

The AWSPN-ZC was created to be a champion for gender equality in the sector by shifting the narrative from African women merely being seen as beneficiaries to becoming decision-makers. It fosters greater representation of Zambian women professionals in the sanitation sector, to increase their access to resources, such as information, employment opportunities, and mentorship. One of the innovative solutions was the set-up of a female student award initiative to increase participation in the sector.

*"As a Zambian young female graduate in the sector, I am really motivated to make an even greater impact in the WASH Sector,"* Fides Mukunde Sangwa, who was awarded for being best performing water engineering student at the National Resources Development College (NRDC). *"Water Engineering encompasses climate change, smart agriculture and innovative solutions to increase access to clean water and understanding these interlinkages was one of my major highlights during the course,"* she said.

## Changing the system by uplifting women.

In this landscape of transformation, the AWSPN – ZC has emerged as a beacon of change. It serves as a dynamic intervention that goes beyond the confines of water utility companies, inviting women from diverse backgrounds to unite and break the barriers that have historically restricted their participation in the sanitation sector. The network is increasing female participation doing this through the following:

**Empowering Women's Voices:** The network provides a secure and nurturing platform for women to voice their concerns, needs, and aspirations in the WASH sector. Over 60 women from diverse backgrounds are now members.

**Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building:** AWSPN-ZC facilitates the exchange of knowledge, skills, and best practices among women working in the sanitation and water supply sector, bolstering their professional growth through training programs, workshops, and mentorship opportunities. *“I am here because I want to learn more about the water sector in Zambia,”* said Niza Nachitalwe, a pupil

from Lusaka, Zambia. *“A lot of people think that girls can't do things that boys can do but I know that girls can also do it. I am inspired by the strong women I meet working in the sector”*

**Advocacy for Gender-Inclusive Policies:** The network is at the forefront of advocating for gender-sensitive policies and practices within the sector, uniting its members' voices to drive change at all levels. The government of Zambia now **reserves 30%** enrolment for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to promote the girl child and to ensure that they have access to quality skills development.

## Successes scored by the network.

- Becoming a key member of the Zambia Water Supply and Sanitation Skills Advisory Group (WSS SAG). This government-driven multi-stakeholder steering committee brings together the water and sanitation employers, employees and skills providers to exchange knowledge on skills and labour market needs.
- Implementing a mentorship program for AWSPN-ZC members and interns working in commercial utilities. Over **54 interns** and **20 AWSPN-ZC members** have benefitted from the program.
- Participating in the first-ever Plumbing Expo between on the 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2023 with **four girls** showcasing their plumbing skills at the Government Complex. The expo had various plumbers representing different provinces in Zambia participating in a skills challenge.
- Conducting **8 inspirational career talks** in Zambian high schools with a combined population of **10,000 pupils** to encourage girls to consider careers in water and sanitation. This resulted in **109 girls** showing interest in pursuing careers in water and sanitation.
- Building a robust social media presence on platforms like [LinkedIn](#) and Facebook with a combined following of close to **500**.
- Actively participating in water and sanitation forums, including the GIZ Sector Network on Water Supply and Sanitation (SOWAS), The Stockholm World Water Week, COP Climate Change conferences, World Water Forum, Equal Aqua Forum, and Zambia Water Forum and Exhibition.
- Delivering guest lectures at colleges and aiding in the development of criteria for awarding the best-performing female students in water and sanitation-related fields in Zambia's higher learning institutions. **Four (4) students** have so far been awarded.

## Partnerships and collaborations.

The network, with support from the GIZ SIWaS project in Zambia, has established fruitful partnerships with core actors in the sanitation sector:

- The national regulator, the National Water Supply and Sanitation Council, has become an integral part of the network's operations, hosting the network's physical office. They have embarked on a joint mission to quantify and profile sanitation workers involved in the sanitation service chain.
- The Water and Sanitation Skills Advisory Group (WSS SAG) has tapped into the network's expertise for its Water Utility Interns mentorship program.
- The Sustainable Sanitation Alliance (SuSanA) African Chapter coordinator holds a distinguished position as a member of ASWPN-ZC and several network members serve as moderators.
- The network is a founding partner of the World Bank's Water Global Practice Equal Aqua platform, an achievement accomplished with support from the Global Water Security & Sanitation Partnership (GWSP) and other collaborators.
- The GIZ Thriving through Innovative Vocational Education in the Water and Energy Sectors (THRIVE) project in Zambia is collaborating internally with the GIZ SIWaS project in ensuring that females in TEVET institutions have access to quality mentorship through the AWSPN-ZC.

## Lessons learned.

A lot of lessons have been learnt which are outlined below:

- The BMZ feminist Development Policy aims to eliminate discriminatory structures in order to build a society which enables equal participation by all people. It is therefore time for African women to take leadership and change the narrative on their role in sanitation and water development. This can only happen if there is equal participation of women, improved access to resources and proactively strengthening their representation in decision making processes and political structures.
- Financing activities has been challenging given that the network only charges a minimum of € 2 for students and a maximum €32 for members. Charging higher fees would disenfranchise low-income members.
- Partnering with the National Water Supply and Sanitation Council has resulted in the AWSPN-ZC network being exposed to a wide range of actors and further provided free office space for the network resulting in reduced operational costs.
- The mentoring program has provided female sanitation professionals with a safe mentorship space. However, there are limited numbers of female mentors and there is need to carefully co-opt male mentors as well.
- There is need to establish a sustainability mechanism for the network to be able to expand to more rural districts and conduct more outreach activities.
- In general, whoever has the power determines the pace, resources, locations and type of sanitation facilities to be constructed. Therefore women, girls and other vulnerable households continue to lag in accessing these services due to lack of income, land tenure and absence in decision-making. Additionally, sanitation service provision goes beyond the provision of infrastructure only but should focus on the entire sanitation chain to ensure service sustainability. Gender stereotypes should continuously be challenged since they are a threat to women's access, provision and participation in the water and sanitation sector.



## Photo Gallery



Female intern emptying a pit latrine.



Girls Take Over' event encouraged females to join the water sector.



AWSPN-ZC members in September 2023



Some of the girls that took part in the Girls Take Over event in March 2023.



Female plumber demonstrates skills during Plumbing Expo in Lusaka



Exhibiting during a Plumbing Expo in Lusaka, Zambia

The African Women Sanitation Professionals Network is supported by the **GIZ Strengthening Institutions for Sustainable Water Supply and Sanitation (SIWaS) Project in Zambia**. (AV: Doreen Mbalo. Email: [doreen.mbalo@giz.de](mailto:doreen.mbalo@giz.de))

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