

Gender Aspects of Sustainable Sanitation based on experiences and literature research

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Abstract

This paper gives background information on the need to integrate a gender perspective into the efforts to promote safe and sustainable sanitation. WECF and network implemented many UDD toilet projects in the EECCA countries during the last years. Based on these experiences and an intensive literature research, this paper will provide guidance on how to mainstream gender into this sector.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Sustainable Sanitation, Ecological Sanitation, Gender mainstreaming, urine diverting dry toilet (UDD toilet)

Background

One of the most observable divides between women and men, especially in developing countries, is in sanitation and hygiene. The provision of hygiene and sanitation are often considered women's tasks. Women are promoters, educators and leaders of home and community-based sanitation practices. However, women's concerns are rarely addressed in the provision of sanitation facilities, as societal barriers often restrict women's involvement in decision-making regarding toilets, sanitation programmes and projects. And in many societies, women's views – as opposed to those of men - are systematically under-represented in decision-making bodies.

Women and children often bear the brunt of the lack of toilets and other sanitation facilities. Women, more than men, suffer the indignity of being forced to defecate and urinate in the open, even at risk of assault and rape. (1) The majority of those using public defecation areas, where hygienic conditions are often poor and disease is close, are women. (2) In the absence of

sanitary facilities, factors such as modesty or risk of attack mean that women often have to wait until dark to go to the toilet. That is why women often drink less, causing all kinds of health problems (incl. urinary tract infections, chronic constipation and other gastric disorders).

In rural areas of many regions, men often avoid using the bad smelling pit latrines and instead relieve themselves in the countryside, whereas women are dependent on the pit latrines several times a day. In urban areas women and girls face innumerable security risks and other dangers when they use toilets shared with men.

With the lack of safe sanitation, women's dignity, safety and health are at stake.

Responsibilities, construction and maintenance

Whereas cleaning of toilets is primarily the responsibility of women, construction and maintenance of pit latrines (digging, repairing and exhausting) is primarily done by men. (4, 15) However, in some regions, the task of emptying the latrines falls exclusively on the shoulders of poor women, and the labor-conditions under which they do this work are appalling. (1) In many households women are also responsible for making sure there is sufficient water for sanitation and there are many cases where women have to pay for water from limited household budgets. (4) Despite the role of women in hygiene and sanitation at household level, toilet construction programmes that provide income-generation opportunities often presume that only men will be interested in or suited for those tasks. Both women and men need access to cash income and would welcome the potential economic benefits of ecological sanitation and related small entrepreneurs. (15)



Figure 1a and b: Typical gender roles, Men responsible for the construction and Women for furnishing and operation

In the design, location and construction of toilets and sanitation blocks, inadequate attention is paid to the specific needs of women and men, boys and girls. Sanitation programmes, as with many other development programmes, have often been built around assumptions of some gender-neutrality. This results in gender-specific failures, such as, toilets with doors facing the street in which women feel insecure, school urinals that are too high for boys, absence of disposal for sanitary materials by women, pour-flush toilets that require considerably more work

for women in transporting water. Also, sanitation blocks are sometimes used for multiple functions, including washing and drying, shelter from rain and as meeting places, but not designed for those purposes. (4)

Sustainable sanitation

Women are actively involved in food crop production and food security in many parts of the world, and are directly affected by increased soil nutrients provided through ecological sanitation, for their rural and urban agriculture.

In general: women's attitudes towards urine diverting dry (UDD) toilets seem to be more positive than those of men. In many cases, such as in Garla Mare (see text box), women prefer the UDD toilets while men prefer water flush toilets.

In Garla Mare, a typical Romanian village of 3,500 citizens without a central water supply, ecosan school toilets (urine diverting) were introduced by Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF), Medium et Sanitas and Hamburg University of Technology, replacing the old unacceptable pit latrines.

The toilets were built for demonstration and proved to be clean, cheap, and produce excellent fertilizer, that has been used to grow corn and paprika. Both men and women contributed to their implementation in their traditional roles, men were the builders and women were those teaching their children about how to use the toilets and hygiene..

After one year of operation, a **survey** that was executed in the village among 40 respondents (21 women/19 men) showed the following results:

Only 3% of women were willing to invest in a (new type of) toilet; for men this percentage was 20%. 10% women were willing if it would fit into their budget. This is understandable as the income level of most families is extremely low and they can hardly afford to buy enough food for themselves. But it also shows that more investigation is needed around financial aspects, and the fact that men feel there are enough financial options, and women do not.

74% of women as opposed to 58% of men want dry urine diverting toilets for the school; whereas 32% of the men and 17% of the women would prefer a water flush toilet. The arguments women mentioned were that the toilets are good for children's health, there are less odors, and children are happy with them. Schoolgirls, who were interviewed separately, would like to have such toilets at home.

Acceptance of UDD toilets by women

Women would like to have the toilets in house, as that would reduce walking distances also during bad weather conditions, but often there is not enough room in the house. They are also often more willing to use the fertilizer in their fields and gardens. Therefore women and children (via schools) could play an important role in motivating and educating others to use UDDT projects.

Experiences until now also show that demonstration projects of local women's groups can be great examples of how fast and sustainable change can be made. (25)

Some experts, however, warn for the fact that sustainable sanitation systems such as urine diverting dry toilets (UDDT) require more work in cleaning, maintenance, and application of urine and faeces. Much of that work is done by women, so that could add to their work burden.

Specific consideration is needed for hygienic needs of women and girls. During a girl's or women's menstrual cycle, blood will inevitably enter the urine and faeces chambers when she uses the UDD toilet. This organic material poses no threat to the sanitizing or composting process nor to its future use as agricultural fertilizer or compost. But there are psychological problems arising from this: traces of blood that are left behind and remain there for future users to see are often an embarrassment to women and girls, and could hinder their use of the toilets. A simple solution is to provide a brush and water to wash the toilet; limited amounts of water, one or two cups, do not do harm to the system. If the faeces chamber becomes too moist, additional absorbing material like wood, dust or ashes can be added. As sanitary materials are often non-biodegradable, that should not be disposed of in the toilets. Therefore, wrapping materials and a proper container for disposal should be provided. This is particularly important in public places, and in schools. (26, 27, 28)

For older women, there might be the perception that they are not able to use the UDD toilets properly as they might be not able to separate adequately. They do not talk about it but reject the new toilets. This is a typical case of taboo and awareness raising need. It must be clarified that even though there is not a total separation (100% separation is not realizable anyway), the toilet system still works fine.

Therefore it is important to closely monitor these projects and operations in a gender specific way.

Gender Mainstreaming in sanitation

In order to achieve gender equality women's empowerment and full participation are important strategies. The process to thoroughly integrate a gender perspective in institutions and operations is called gender mainstreaming. According to the ECOSOC definition gender mainstreaming is: "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality." (ECOSOC, 1997)

Gender mainstreaming leads to benefits that go beyond good water and sanitation performance, including economic benefits, empowerment of women, more gender equality and benefits to children. (5)

Gender mainstreaming works best through an adaptive, process-oriented approach, that is participatory and responsive to the needs of the poor. Specific institutional arrangements are necessary to ensure that gender is considered an integral part of efficient and effective planning and implementation. (2) This encompasses, for example, the development of gender policies and procedures, commitment at all organizational levels, the availability of – internal or external - gender expertise. Gender must be addressed in policy formulation and by-laws. (2) The

following elements of the gender mainstreaming process can safeguard a gender perspective in sustainable sanitation. (5)

In gender mainstreaming in sanitation, one has to be aware of a few **pitfalls**, according to a publication of the Asia Water Watch 2015: (6)

- (a) Women may be encouraged to take on sanitation management roles and additional work, but they might receive no additional resources or influence to perform these tasks. This could be the case in particular for UDDT systems, where more maintenance work is required than for pit latrines.
- (b) The introduction of a ‘user pays’ system for toilets and other sanitation facilities may cause a considerable burden for women, particularly for those living in poverty. On the other hand there are also studies showing that women are willing to pay for hygienic and safe toilets (2).
- (c) If hygiene education is identified solely as a ‘women’s area’, men may stay away from those, and those components may be seen as less important.
- (d) Women may receive more training, but may be prevented from putting their own skills and knowledge into practice by cultural or social norms.

In order to succeed in bringing a gender perspective in sustainable sanitation policies and programs, it is imperative to also involve men, enable them to share their views on gender issues and promote their gender sensitivity. Women as well as men have to be recognized as important actors, stakeholders and change-agents in households and communities.

Guiding Questions for gender mainstreaming

As has been shown in the text and cases above: without a gender perspective in sustainable sanitation and hygiene policies and efforts, unexpected side effects can occur, such as adding extra burdens for women or men and/or facilities are constructed that do not meet the needs of women and girls. On the other hand: mainstreaming a gender perspective in the sector can add to its effectively and efficiency. The following guiding questions can be helpful in the process of integrating a gender perspective in sustainable sanitation planning, design and implementation. (1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 20)

Gender analysis:

- Have you developed a socioeconomic profile¹ of the target population?
- Have you investigated the gender issues related to sanitation provision and use in the project area?
- Are women’s (and men’s) needs, interests and priorities regarding sanitation clear?
- What are the gender-specific elements in the sanitation policies and strategies of the government, company or institution?

¹ A socioeconomic profile includes a description of social and economic factors of the population, incl. the size, density, growth, composition (incl. sex, age, different social groups), economic resources, employment, education, access to and control over resources and services.

- Did you use a gender perspective to gather information? Are the gathered data sex-disaggregated?

Institutional aspects:

- Is expertise in social development, sanitation and hygiene education available in the organization, project or program team?
- Are women and men fully involved in the organization and have internal discriminatory factors been tackled successfully?
- Are there any constraints for women and/or men to access and control over resources?

Gender impact assessment:

- Will the programme objectives and activities have an impact on existing inequalities between women and men, boys and girls?
- How will women and men be affected by the programme? E.g. will their work burdens be in/decreased; their health be affected; economic benefits. Is there gender balance in the burdens and benefits?
- Is the budget gender sensitive?

Gender specific monitoring and evaluation:

- Do you measure and monitor for separate effects on women, men, girls and boys? How?

Location and design:

- Does the design and location of sanitation facilities reflect the needs of women and men?
- Are toilets situated in such a way that physical security of women and girls is guaranteed?
- Is the location close to home and is the path well accessible and well-lit?
- Are separate toilets for women and men, boys and girls constructed and maintained (e.g. in schools, factories, public places)?

Technology and resources:

- Does the technology used reflect women's and men's priorities and needs?
- Is the technical and financial planning for ongoing operation and maintenance of facilities in place? And how are women involved?
- Have funds been earmarked for separate sanitation facilities for girls and boys, and for hygiene education in school curricula?

Empowerment and decision-making:

- Is women's capacity developed and their participation in training encouraged?
- Are women and girls enabled to acquire access to relevant information, training and resources?
- Is there gender balance in decision-making?
- Are women involved in the planning (incl. location and quality) and management of sanitation services?
- Have hygiene education messages been promoted through women's groups, schools and health clinics?

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