

Using water to tackle gender inequality

1. Summary of the impact

The absence of basic sanitation and safe water and sanitation is an acute problem for many who live in poor or rural areas of developing countries, and this is particularly so for women and girls. Despite evidence suggesting that their involvement in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services has substantial benefits, they are often not involved in decision making and their specific needs may not be met .

However, inclusive participatory approaches to WASH have potential to change this. A team of researchers from the UTS Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) and the International Women's Development Agency came together to investigate gender outcomes arising from participatory approaches to WASH, and what evolved is the potential to use water as an entry point to tackle gender inequality at the same time as ensuring that women's WASH needs are met.

Focusing on the Pacific Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu, the team developed an evidence base that demonstrated a breadth of outcomes in relation to meeting the practical needs of women and girls, as well as wider changes in women's role, status and relationships in households and communities. They then translated this evidence base into practical guidance material to support practitioners and governments implementing WASH programs.

The success of their research and its practically-oriented outputs has triggered changes in the practice of multiple non-governmental organisations (NGOs) implementing WASH in Pacific, Asia and more broadly. Combined with other subsequent research and advocacy-related actions by the researchers and their colleagues, it was also the beginning of a wave of new projects spreading across the Asia Pacific region. As a result, more aid money is flowing into WASH initiatives with a focus on gender equality to free women from a cycle of poverty, disease, child mortality and low productivity.

2. Problem

The lack of access to basic sanitation and safe water is an acute problem for many people living in isolated parts of the world. In many cases, women and girls disproportionately bear the burden of domestic duties, often spending several hours of their day to fetch water for the household.

As such, the vital role of women in WASH interventions cannot be understated. Despite evidence that women's involvement in the planning, design, management and implementation of such projects is successful and cost-effective, women are not as centrally engaged in water and sanitation efforts as they should be.

As a result, many WASH projects fail their community because they tend to reinforce women's domestic roles, pay little attention to intra-household gender dynamics and decision-making and overlook the specific sanitation and privacy needs of women and adolescent girls.

3. Beneficiaries

The original research focused on Melanesian communities engaged with non-government organisation WASH programs in Fiji and Vanuatu. Subsequent research and implementation initiatives have expanded to Indonesia, Vietnam, Timor-Leste, Cambodia and other parts of Asia and Pacific.

While these projects have involved entire communities, women and girls have been key beneficiaries, both of better WASH services, and in some cases, also as female entrepreneurs benefiting economically from WASH-related enterprise roles. In particular, the work promotes a stronger focus on gender, and increased capability to integrate gender into water and sanitation projects in these regions.

4. Approach to impact

Women's rights are tackled on many fronts, but ISF and the International Women's Development Agency collaborated on innovative ideas and methods to advance gender equality.

Headed by ISF Research Director and recognised expert in the field of water and sanitation, Professor Juliet Willetts, the team set out to tackle gender inequality through research into its intersection with WASH interventions.

Water and WASH initiatives offer a powerful entry point for generating positive gender outcomes because women and girls play key roles in the provision, management and safeguarding of water in their communities. According to the World Health Organisation/UNICEF progress report on water and sanitation (2008), in 75% of cases in developing countries, it is women who collect and carry water. Predictably, their exclusion from WASH decision making has resulted in inappropriate system design and perpetuation of existing gender inequalities, leading to negative social and economic impacts.

In the Pacific region, gender inequality is still particularly pervasive. Women's representation in parliament is the lowest in the world, and women's lack of voice, combined with high rates of gender-based violence, undermines their participation in political, social and economic life. Although all Pacific Island countries have endorsed actions to eliminate gender discrimination, more needs to be done to implement commitments nationally.

In response to this, the team launched a research initiative focusing on communities in Fiji and Vanuatu. They adopted an evidence-based advocacy strategy to demonstrate that gender equality is integral to sustainable development and aid effectiveness. In addition, through this and other related research, the team hoped to catalyse investment by the government in water and sanitation.

The researchers used a strength-based approach, informed by principles of empowerment, appreciation and participation. The aim was to support a constructive reflection for community members, NGO staff and researchers, specifically focusing on increasing the capability to integrate gender into WASH activities and have an open conversation about gender issues.

In each case study community, the research team spent two days working with 10-20 men and approximately 20 women.

The study allowed community participants to share their own ideas about the changes they desired with regard to women's and men's workloads, roles and relationships. To do so, participants were asked to think about their daily routine, their strengths as a community, and the values they collectively foster. Research activities were very practical and included story-telling, group discussion, prioritisation, visioning and a pocket voting activity. According to Willetts, one particularly powerful activity was the 'Coconut Tree'. In this metaphorical task, the participants were able to identify causes, pathways and results in gender equality using a drawing of a coconut tree with its roots, trunk and fruits.

This first initiative launched in 2009 and its success led to subsequent funding for new projects which are still continuing today, such as a recent framing paper on Gender Equality and WASH for the High-Level Panel for Water appointed by the UN Secretary, and the 'Enterprise in WASH' which includes a focus on female entrepreneurs

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

Although the initial South Pacific project was carried out on a small scale, it has triggered a chain of important developments for water and sanitation programs, gender equality awareness as well as research in this area.

In the academic context, the research project has been able to demonstrate the strong link between two important United Nations Millennium Development Goals (now replaced subsequently by the Sustainable Development Goals): gender equality and WASH. According to Professor Willetts, being able to connect these two issues with a solid evidence-based foundation in addition to broader work proving the value of NGO implemented programs has sparked a series of government funding for aid programs and investment in water and sanitation programming.

Some examples include two multi-million-dollar Civil Society Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Funds (CS WASH Fund) to deliver 29 WASH projects in 19 countries, and a new fund, Water for Women worth \$110 million. Especially for the latter, Professor Willetts has put into practice much of the thinking and learning she has done over the past decade.

In addition, this important foundational work has seen the development of an academic

research framework for understanding gender outcomes in relation to WASH programs led by a member of Willetts' team, Naomi Carrard. This framework is widely read and used by practitioners in this field, and serves to monitor and evaluate research processes related to measure and understand gender outcomes.

The reach of the project also extended into the political sphere, with papers prepared for the High-Level Panel for Water, including a framing paper at the request of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, led by another of Willetts' team, Melita Grant.

As a result of the evidence that women's participation in committees at community level could be an entry point for improved women's voice and leadership, the Australian government aid program adopted an aggregate indicator focused on women's representation in committees at community level, applicable across all aid programs.

The CS WASH Fund in particular has had clear outcomes for women and their involvement in WASH programs. For example, some 1.8 million girls and women have gained access to WASH services, over half of the 2,000 WASH committees involved now have 50% women, and the goals for the number of women in technical and management roles on these committees have already been exceeded.

5.2. Impact

Gender equality and social inclusion continue to require explicit attention around the globe. In order to address the needs of women, action needs to be taken in multiple spheres, including legislation, policies and programs. Meaningful participation is also required at micro-level, in the household, family and community. Thus, it is difficult to measure and quantify the social impact of the WASH initiatives and research projects.

However, for the communities involved in the South Pacific research, life had undeniably changed both within the home and inside their community.

Both women and men valued how they had worked together to contribute to community-level activities such as waste management and community sanitation. The work had increased trust and respect for women and the important role they play. Women's efforts to promote community sanitation and health were recognised by men, and for the first time, women were able to take on leadership roles in their community. As such, their voices are better heard and they are actively involved in negotiations and decision-making processes.

Within the family, the projects had increased levels of cooperation and collaboration between women and men, and particularly, men taking a stronger role in areas where they were previously absent. There were also perceived improvements in the relationship between women and men within the household, which they refer to as 'greater love and

listening'. It had resolved issues at the household level, especially how roles, work and tasks are negotiated, shared and valued.

Moreover, men are showing women more respect and support due to an increased sense of pride in their clean families and homes, and an understanding of the effort that is behind it. It also included changes in the gendered division of labour, with men increasingly sharing household responsibilities such as cooking and playing a greater role in hygiene.

Such changes represent increased power for women and ability to negotiate with their male counterparts both at home and in their communities.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

According to Prof Willetts, the success of the initiatives can be traced back to the unique set of skills within her team and their partners at IWDA, as well as the passion and drive for social justice and change in developing countries.

Though a trained engineer, Prof Willetts has felt an urgent commitment to social justice formed at a young age while travelling around India and recognising that she can use her own privilege and skills to serve a much greater community than just her own.

With six professional awards for research excellence, Prof Willetts has dedicated her expertise and resources to the human rights to water and sanitation, gender equality, civil society role in development, governance and accountability, climate change, urban development, monitoring, evaluation and development effectiveness more broadly.

Prof Willetts also credits the success of these projects to the hard work and dedication of her fellow team members who have brought together a wealth of expertise in the areas of policy and practice in WASH as well as gender and community engagement and carry similar values in terms of social justice.

6.2. External enabling factors

The Pacific research carried out in Fiji and Vanuatu was supported by an Australian aid funded Australian Development Research Award. The Australian research team also partnered with Live & Learn Environmental Education in Fiji and World Vision Vanuatu.

Subsequent projects were made possible through the CS WASH Fund and the Australian Government's Australian Development Research Awards Scheme.

7. Challenges

Working in such a niche while trying to influence change on multiple levels comes with a number of challenges for the research team.

According to Prof Willetts, one of the key challenges for her team is to be based in Australia and thus removed from the action, therefore carrying out some aspects of the research from a distance. It is important that the team makes a conscious effort to be embedded enough and have a deep understanding of the dynamics on the ground to do good quality work that has integrity.

To overcome this challenge, partnerships are critical. The research team relies on international collaboration with national and local governments and NGO partners to co-develop the evidence base, and they increasingly partner with local research institutions. In addition, local practitioners assist with their community relationships, and thus provide the vital link to local participants and issues.

Another challenge is raising awareness and securing commitment to research focused at a country level at the same time as partaking in the global dialogue and policy surrounding the WASH sector. In order to work with NGOs, secure funding and influence the way aid money is spent, the research team is drawn in many different directions. Prof Willetts argues that researchers must never lose sight of doing good quality work that is oriented to have impact, and service multiple audiences while prioritising rigorous ethical research.

To overcome these challenges, Prof Willetts fosters global research mentorship and solidarity. In many aid-receiving countries, academic research is not as appreciated or well-funded as in Australia, and may not engage with stakeholders in the same ways as

ISF's work to ensure engagement and impact. As such, international collaboration and partnership supports researchers in countries that are less able to fund these sorts of initiatives while providing the vital local link to Australian-based teams.

8. Associated research

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9. References

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<http://www.enterpriseinwash.info/>

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Working effectively with women and men in water, sanitation and hygiene programs poster:

