

## **With Women Better Results in Water Management**

“With Women Better Results in Water Management”, is the title of a recent publication of Women for Water Partnership (WfWP). The study was funded by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). (full report: [here](#))

The reason behind initiating this study was that an earlier study on the impact of women’s participation showed that in some corners of the private sector, it is more common to measure the impact of women in decision-making positions and showing positive results – contrary to the public sector. Companies with higher numbers of women in leadership teams outperform those with fewer women, often by 30%. Moreover, leadership styles more frequently used by women are the most effective in addressing the global challenges of the future and critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

WfWP was curious to get to know the situation in the water sector and together with OECD undertook a preparatory study in 2018. One of the first conclusions of that study was that in the water sector data and studies about the relationship between women’s involvement and results are scarce.

The current publication builds on that earlier study and focusses on the following questions: What are the results when more women are involved in decision- making processes? What are good practices of women’s involvement at different levels of governance (national, basin, local) in the water sector? What are the main drivers and enabling factors to increase the involvement of women in water governance? What are effective strategies?

Eighteen organisations have been approached to join the research and thirteen of them responded positively. They cover private water operators, governmental water agencies, community groups, national and international NGOs, and research institutes in several parts of the globe, including India, Tanzania, Great Britain, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Armenia, India, the Nile Basin, Malawi, Jordan, Madagascar, and Africa. The practices described in the case studies vary from access to water, sanitation, and hygiene, to water awareness, water quality, the fight against pollution, irrigation, research in the field of climate and water, to transboundary water management and the complete water sector within a country. In short, a wide range of practices covering SDG 6 and water-related targets implemented by different types of organisations in varied settings of the world.

Another part of the research is a literature review to establish a global view on the involvement of women in (water) governance processes, also looking beyond the water sector itself. Both the literature review and the case studies are the backbone of this publication.

It was concluded that in some ways the water sector is different from other sectors but also has many similarities with other sectors. In many countries, women are responsible for water and have therefore gained significant knowledge in the field of water management. This knowledge is insufficiently utilised in the professional water sector. It is as such, a hidden source of ‘capacity’, a source of knowledge often not available in other sectors. On the other hand, the water sector is like other ‘technical’ sectors in that it is difficult to recruit women and keep them on board, but once women are ‘in’ the performance of these

organisations or projects increases. Next, in all sectors, including the water sector, special efforts are required to increase and sustain the involvement of women.

### **Results and approaches**

Similar to research in the commercial sector and the few investigations in the water sector, the thirteen case studies also show that the performance within and beyond the water sector improves with the increased involvement of women. Examples include: barriers for tariff setting have been resolved and the willingness to pay improved; better services to customers; increased access to clean water; improved maintenance; efficiency of irrigation projects has increased (less water usage); less pollution; safe sanitation; better health; more nutritious food; more women and girls empowered; better access to education and skills training; higher attention to climate change, environmental and social issues; change in the composition of staff (more women on board); safer workspaces; better economic opportunities (jobs, own businesses)

The cases have been divided into three categories indicating the main differences in approaches:

- **Involvement of women**, meaning that women are involved in the implementation of a project and/or activity and not deliberately in decision-making processes.
- **Women-only projects** are projects which have been designed, implemented, and controlled by women and women have fully taken part in all phases of the decision-making processes.
- **Systemic inclusion of women**, meaning that deliberate and systematic actions have been taken and/or planned to involve women in all levels of an organisation including decision-making processes to change the system.

In terms of approaches, particularly in the category of 'women-only projects', listening to the women involved to better understand them and their needs was essential, not only at the start of the project but during implementation. With increased listening and communication, changes were able to be made throughout the process, less conventional methods were used, and risks were taken to reach the objectives. In the category, 'systemic inclusion of women' commitment at the top of an organisation proves essential. Additionally, clear targets are key, as is having a picture of the composition of the staff at different levels of an organisation. In 'women-only project' and 'the systemic inclusion of women' many measures have been taken to involve women in all stages of a project, or at all levels of an organisation, including in the decision-making processes. The whole system is being adapted to facilitate the inclusion of women.

### **Bottlenecks**

There are many bottlenecks evident for women and girls to be included in (decision-making processes) in the water sector, such as the influence of stereotypes and cultural norms (often unconsciously). These biases practiced by both women and men perpetuate the narrative of what women can and cannot do. Furthermore, laws may prevent participation, worldwide on average women have 75% of the legal rights of men to land, water and decision-making. Occupational segregation and a smaller number of female graduates at different educational levels in STEM areas, lack of facilities, appropriate equipment, and sexual violence. These bottlenecks need to be addressed to realise the ambition of

increasing the effective participation of women.

### **Drivers**

Drivers to include more women differ across organisations and are often a combination of moral reasons such as equality between men and women, as well as the demonstrated improvement of performance, and the qualities of women such as the ability to communicate and manage funds. Next, declarations and conventions for example the Dublin Principles emphasising women's central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water, might play a role. However, implementation is happening at a very slow pace.

### **Enablers**

Enablers are manifold such as the commitment of the top (executive) level within organisations. Supportive laws and policies act as enabling factors, as do specific budgets that engage, attract, train, women and carry out specific activities to retain women coupled with changes in HR policy and procedures. Moreover, altering mindsets and addressing unconscious biases is key. Creating the right environment and conditions for women to participate might include appropriate clothing and equipment, bathroom facilities, breastfeeding rooms, or childcare, together with access to ICT and transport. Consideration must be given to the presence of family responsibilities including caring for the elderly. The appointment of gender experts to support the implementation of a gender strategy and action plan, clear objectives and targets, and the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data and gender-responsive budgeting are also crucial.

### **Guidelines for change**

The lessons of the literature review, the experiences of the members of WfWP and the thirteen case studies, lead to the following five guidelines to stimulate and facilitate the inclusion of more women in decision-making processes in the water sector:

1. Analyse a situation to understand how many men and women are involved, how and where, what are the issues of the women in a specific context (women are not one group, but heterogenous), what are the stereotypes at play, and how much resources are available for men and women. It is not a one-time action. During all phases it remains important to continue to listen to women to identify problems and design solutions.
2. Translate the analysis into a plan with clear objectives, measurable targets, and a sound budget: a 40-40 balance between men and women is such a target, leaving 20% free. Involve men and especially women in drafting a plan and in the decision-making process around the plan and the budget.
3. Make sure the top level is committed, remains committed and that their messages are consistent. Do not leave other layers of management behind and develop clear accountability mechanisms. Moreover, organise support for the implementors to be able to translate policy into practice for example by introducing focal points, ambassadors or help with training.
4. Create the conditions for women to be included and remain included, such as by changing HR policies and regulations, organising leadership courses or mentor programmes to encourage women to apply for decision-making positions, giving access to women for vocational training or accepting and certifying already acquired skills. Moreover, by addressing stereotypes and unconscious bias regularly to change mindsets, by ensuring that there are facilities for women such as toilets, appropriate equipment and clothing,

breastfeeding spaces, access to ICT and transport, by taking action against sexual violence.

5. To keep abreast with the developments, develop a monitoring system which provides both quantitative and qualitative sex-disaggregated data. Analyse the data regularly to enable learning and introduce necessary adaptations to plan and budget. Next, gender-responsive budgeting helps to gain more insights between inputs and results.

These guidelines are interconnected and reinforce each other.

**Inclusion of women needs specific efforts: when doing this, better results are guaranteed!**

[To read the full report](#)