Women's empowerment through rural water supply activities: A practical guide by and for practitioners of the Rural Water Supply Network

Executive Summary

This practical guide is the result of a consultation and co-creation process with members of the Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN). Engineers and gender experts have come together to overcome jargon barriers from their respective disciplines. This guide aims to provide water specialists with the language and knowledge on how best to work with gender experts to build more transformative activities.

To create this guide, RWSN members were invited to a collaborative e-workshop, a multilingual e-discussion, and to comment on the draft version of the guide. Furthermore, gender experts in the field of rural water supply were consulted throughout the process to ensure that simplification of the language did not undermine rigour of the underlying social science. The guide also draws upon lessons from RWSN members collected during a former e-discussion on "How women's engagement in Water User Committees impact on its performance and system functionality" (2016) and a webinar on "Making Water Work for Women, Sharing Inspiring Experiences" (2017).

The guide has five parts: The introduction presents the rationale behind this guide and highlights elements to keep in mind throughout the guide. Then, the concepts of women's empowerment, as understood in this guide, are introduced and broken down into five key factors: access to information; participation; engagement & inclusiveness; power dynamics & structures; and capacity-building. Part three provides practical steps to follow within each empowerment factor, while false beliefs (or myths) are exposed. After looking at the factors, part four looks at women's empowerment throughout the cycle of an activity: identification, design; implementation; monitoring & evaluation; and reporting. Each stage contains a checklist of actions. Finally, concluding remarks underline the importance of women's empowerment as a strategic objective in itself, and discuss the impact on external stressors on women's empowerment.

The co-authors were aware of the rich variety of tools that already exist, related to women's empowerment, and wanted to make this wealth of knowledge available. Throughout the collaborative writing process, useful tools were identified and compiled into a list, which is available in the Annex. You are encouraged to have look at the list to deepen your knowledge on the topic and go beyond the content of this guide.

Have we missed something? Do you have questions on any of the aspects raised in this guide? Get in touch with the RWSN Secretariat or join the RWSN Leave No-one Behind community and help us revise and improve this document in future.

Contents

Cover: Pump mechanic Dalia Soda at one of the boreholes she maintains in the village of Nzeremu, Salima District, Malawi, June 2016.
(© WaterAid / Alexia Webster)

Introduction

Why this guide?

You might be wondering why and how another document on women's empowerment in the water sector might be relevant, considering the many tools already available (see the Annex for a selection of key tools). To understand this, you need to know that this guide is unique because of the way it was written: it is the result of a consultation and co-creation process with members of the Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN), a global network of rural water supply professionals and organisations committed to improving their knowledge, competence and professionalism. The combination of inputs and examples from engineers with the language and expertise from gender experts aims to bridge between those two worlds. To jointly create this guide, the members were invited to a collaborative e-workshop, a multilingual e-discussion, and to comment on the draft version of the guide. Additionally, gender experts in the field of rural water supply were consulted throughout the process to ensure the final product balances both the key concepts and jargon from gender experts, as well as inputs and needs from practitioners. The guide also draws upon lessons from RWSN members collected during a former e-discussion on "How women's engagement in Water User Committees impact on its performance and system functionality" (2016) and a webinar on "Making Water Work for Women, Sharing Inspiring Experiences" (2017).

What is the link between Women, Empowerment & Water Supply?

Women in rural communities play an integral role in water supply, often connected to traditional roles of water collection, cooking, cleaning, and child-care. Consequently, practitioners aiming to improve access to and use of quality water supply in rural areas must engage with women to ensure that the impacts of improved supply are fully ensured. However, women are often overlooked in the planning and operation of water supply systems, with practitioners assuming that their water supply activities be automatically beneficial. Not all water supply activities[1] positively impact women's position within the households and/or community. Further, improvements in rural water supply offer not just practical changes in health, education, wellbeing, and time-savings for women and girls, but also provide opportunities for women's engagement and empowerment as users, managers, and change agents in the public and private sector. By adopting the dual objectives of empowerment and water supply, practitioners have an opportunity to challenge gender inequalities **and** improve the quality of life for women, their families, and their communities.[2] Such an approach considers the gender norms and power dynamics which often exclude women from planning and operation of systems.

Who is this guide for?

This practical guide has been designed by and for practitioners working in the rural water sector – civil society, public and private sectors. In particular, it is addressed to those to whom women's empowerment is a new topic, and those who would like to compare their current activities with the recommendations of the guide. The guide is a concrete starting point, to raise awareness on the topic and to demonstrate to water specialists the kind of work involved in women's empowerment. Additionally, it aims to support practitioners to have more informed discussions with (local) gender experts: gender experts focus on the less tangible outcomes of changes in norms and power dynamics, while water practitioners often focus on physical infrastructure. We recommend identifying local gender specialist people or organisations to work with. This guide aims to provide water specialists language and knowledge on how best to work with gender experts to build more transformative activities.

What should you keep in mind throughout the guide?

- **Practitioners can only be facilitators:** While practitioners can play a role as facilitators of women's empowerment, they are not "empowerers" themselves.
- **Local gender specialists are needed:** As women's empowerment requires context-specific skills and experience, we recommend identifying local gender specialists and/or organisations to work with. Traditional knowledge and a deep understanding of local contexts are valuable.
- **Gender equality goes beyond women:** Transformative gender equality must go beyond a sole focus on 'women'. The focus of this guide on women's empowerment aims to ensure the acceptance and practicability of empowerment activities. We hope to discuss other aspects of gender equality in future activities.
- **Women are diverse**: Women's different access and power to use social, physical, natural, financial, or human assets enable or hinder their ability to act in their everyday life.
- **Support women as beneficiaries, managers, and change agents**[3]: As beneficiaries, women are the primary adopters and users of improved water supply. As managers women can participate in the planning, monitoring, operation, and maintenance of water supply systems. As change agents, women can participate in the promotion, community mobilization, and behaviour change communication.
- **Rural water supply is one aspect of WASH and gender:** While the guide focuses on rural water supply, much of the available literature refers more broadly to the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) sector, as well as to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 "Gender equality and empower all women and girls".
- **Women's empowerment is needed at the community level and beyond:** This guide focuses on engaging women in localized rural communities, however wider structural changes are needed e.g. water supply policies, budgets, and educational institutions.

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[1] The word activity was purposefully selected to reflect the diversity of RWSN members and their engagements in rural water supply. The word activity, compared with alternative words such as intervention, implies that women are active in the process. Whereas intervention can imply that external organizations intervene without involving community members.

[2] MacArthur, Jess, Naomi Carrard, and Juliet Willetts. "WASH and Gender: a critical review of the literature and implications for gender-transformative WASH research." *Journal of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Development* (2020).

[3] Elmendorf, Mary Lindsay, and Raymond B. Isely. *The role of women as participants and beneficiaries in water supply and sanitation programs*. Water and Sanitation for Health Project, 1981.

What is "women's empowerment"?

Empowerment is the "expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them"[4] the process of gaining freedom and power to control one's life. **It is a multidimensional and context-specific** concept. It is important to understand the power relations between men and women and the related needs expressed by women in their homes, communities, and wider systems. In this guide, we consider four dimensions of empowerment[5], which are related to water supply and beyond:

- **Physical empowerment** can include aspects such as increased mobility, realizing reproductive rights, safety, and security, as well as access to clean water.
- **Economic empowerment** can include access to and control of one's income, ability to work outside the home, such as in water enterprises, and the right to choose one's education.
- **Political empowerment** can include the right to take part in democratic processes or participation in the governance of water supply systems.
- **Socio-cultural empowerment** considers the roles and relationships of women within families and communities, for example, the sharing of water collection roles.

These four dimensions are interrelated and should be considered together to understand the degree of empowerment of an individual or group. The dimensions should not be seen in isolation. For example, being educated could be part of socio-economic empowerment, however, if the woman is not allowed to work or vote, a woman is not necessarily empowered.

The four dimensions provide different entry points and perspectives to analyse and foster empowerment. *Figure 1* highlights how these four dimensions fit into the wider water and women's empowerment space.

Five empowerment factors in rural water supply

We will now have a closer look at how rural water supply activities can provide an entry point for women's empowerment, by looking at five empowerment factors in rural water supply (adapted from Dery et al. 2020)[6] :

1. **Access to information**: Ensure access to information for women with e.g. community meetings, village health days, workshops, and house-to-house visits.

2. **Meaningful participation**: Encourage meaningful participation e.g. by involving women in the design and governance of water systems.

3. **Engagement and inclusiveness**: Engage not only with women but with men and whole communities is key to overcome barriers to women's empowerment.

4. **Power dynamics and structures**: Explore existing structures and power dynamics, do not deny them but work with them. Identify supportive existing structures to work with.

5. **Capacity building**: Understand the needs and assets of women and offer sustainable capacity-building opportunities on a wide range of topics.
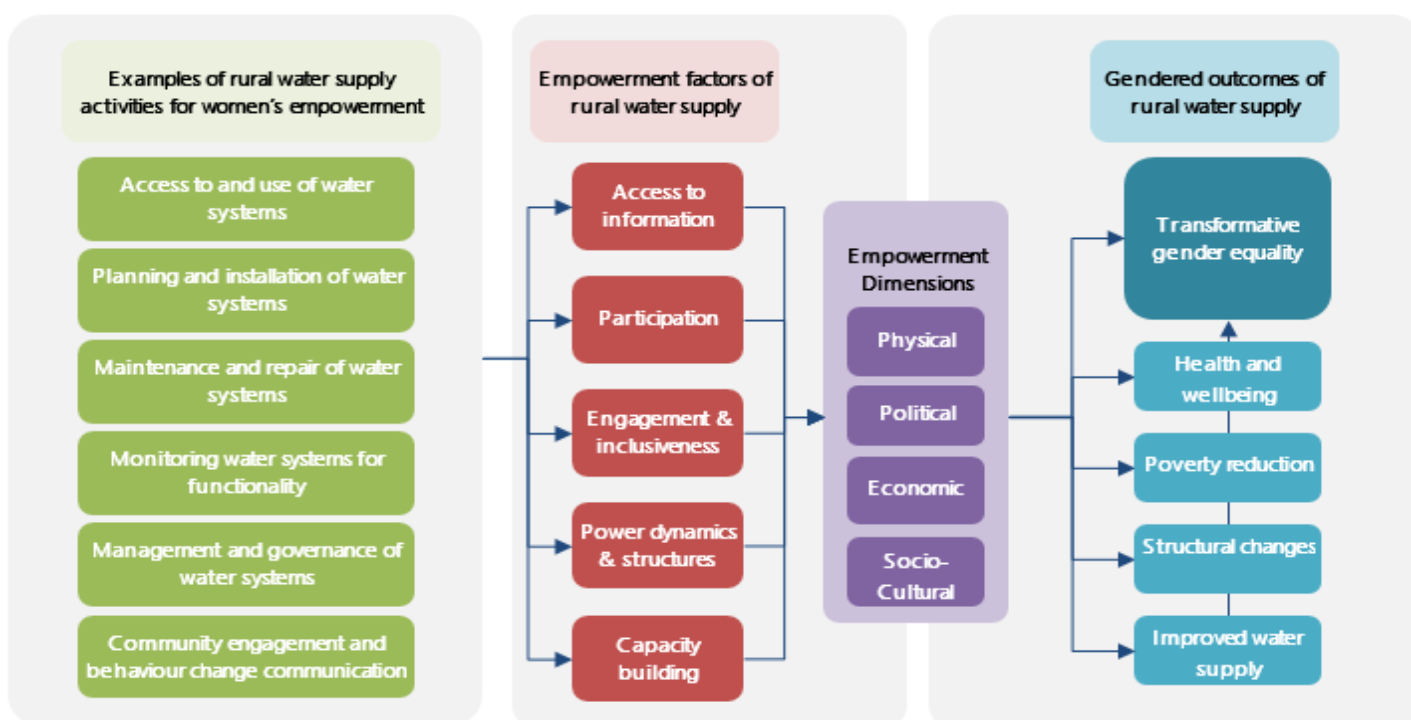

Figure 1: A theory of change for women's empowerment in rural water supply as beneficiaries, managers and change agents (adapted from Elmendorf & Isley 1981).

4 Kabeer, Naila. "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." *Development and change* 30.3 (1999): 435-464.

5 Ahrari, Sara, and Ewout van Galen. "Gender and empowerment through WASH based on cases from Bangladesh." (2017).

6 Dery, Florence, et al. "Understanding empowerment in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH): a scoping review." *Journal of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Development* 10.1 (2020): 5-15.

Practical steps in the five factors

We now move to explore practical steps and examples to promote women's empowerment in your current rural water activities. The steps presented reinforce each other and should be done as a full set; you cannot fulfil all steps within one factor only. Steps can overlap between factors. By taking the steps highlighted in this guide, you are on the way to becoming an enabler! Keep in mind that empowerment is a complex, long-term process. Working with local gender specialists can help you to contextualize these factors and steps and use the best structures to ensure sustained changes in gender equality and water supply.

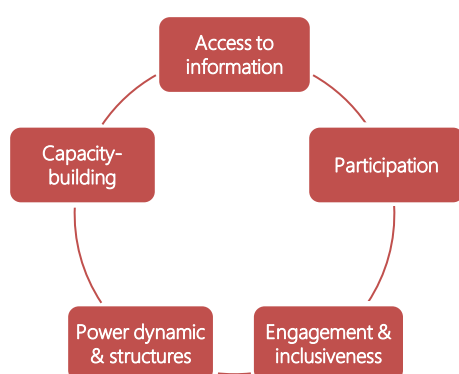**Five factors of women's empowerment in rural water supply**

Figure 2: Five factors of women's empowerment in rural water supply

As rural water practitioners, we often come across **'myths' - widely held but false beliefs and ideas about women's empowerment**. We will present several 'myths' related to each factor. Watch out for these 'myths' and support your wider team and colleagues to become aware of them too.

Factor 1: Access to information

Increasing access to information for women can involve community meetings, village health days, workshops, and house-to-house visits. Obstacles to sharing information to consider include inadequate communication and transportation issues, particularly in rural and remote settings.

Information myths or false beliefs: "Communication should be standardized."; "There are no obstacles to information sharing."; "Information is homogenous."; "Different channels of communication are equivalent."; "Women lack knowledge of water-related issues."

Consider women's capacities, level of education, and awareness of water-related issues: Information related to such as contamination, water-related diseases, poor infrastructures, scarcity, floods/droughts is often inaccessible to women due to illiteracy and unfamiliarly with official languages. The modalities of communication are important: for example, animations, drawings, videos, or pictures can be used for illiterate people. Practitioners should consider options for women with disabilities, and the inclusion of younger generations to reach the older less literate ones.

Ensure information is accessible in remote areas, and at times when women are available: Sharing information from local advisory services or community engagement should be taken into account the times when women have to fulfill their responsibilities (e.g. farming, domestic tasks). Additionally, while mobile phone applications might be interesting in some cases, but often men control access to mobile phones and/or airtime purchases.

Recognize that information is diverse: Women might have access to publicly available information through radio or mobile phone, but not to more confidential or political information that the heads of the village have access to, e.g. through exchange with external partners. Also, information on good hygiene practices is not the same as the information on water filters' effectiveness or water testing.

Explore appropriate channels for communication: Identify where women find their information e.g. through peer or community groups. Providing information through networks that women trust, such as women community leaders or groups that they are part of is crucial. Make information available to their trusted channels of information.

Figure 3: The women's group holding a meeting, in the village of Samabogo, in the Circle of Bla, Region of Segou, Mali, May 2017. (© WaterAid / Basile Ouedraogo)

Promote two-way information sharing: Sharing of information should go two ways both from water practitioners and from women. Women are highly aware of their water-related issues, and ignoring this can lead to a lack of ownership or to projects that end up being counter-productive. Listening to them and recognizing their knowledge on the topic is key.

Example: Menstrual hygiene management (MHM)

Real Relief provides women and girls with information on MHM through the booklet **My First Period**. Designed as a comic, it explains visually what menstruation is about and advises what to expect, what to do, and what not to do during the menstruating period. The approach is to destigmatize and de-mystify periods, restoring women's and girls' dignity, by breaking down taboos.

An example provided during RWSN e-discussion on women's empowerment 2020

Factor 2: Participation

Support women to participate in technical, promotion, policy, advocacy, research, and governance activities within communities, public sector, private sector, and civil society.

Participation myths or false beliefs: "Quotas equals empowerment."; ⚠ *"The number of women in a committee is what matters, not their position."; "Quantitative data on women's participation provides the full picture."; "Women have the time to take an active unremunerated role."*

Commit to quotas for women's participation: Commitments to minimum quotas for women's participation in water activities (e.g. in water committees or activity staff members) is a crucial prerequisite to creating the space for the inclusion of women. A fixed minimal percentage or number of women within water institutions allows women and men to demand the women's right to participate. These commitments are especially needed in national government policies, laws, and guidelines, whenever possible. If it is not possible to work with the government (e.g. in a fragile state context), you can try to work with other existing systems e.g. utilities comprise a parallel system to governmental authorities. However, quotas are not enough: Women need to understand the purpose of the committee and why they are involved.

Recognize that not all positions offer opportunities for participation: It is important to have women in leadership positions related to water activities. For example as the chairperson or vice-chairperson on water committees. Men often fulfil these and women are more likely to be treasurers, secretaries, or hygienists where they have less influence over decisions. If women's roles do not offer any opportunity to influence committee decisions and outcomes, their participation is largely tokenistic/symbolic. Training, education, and capacity building are required for meaningful participation and leadership positions.

Value the quality of participation: The nature of women's participation within water activities should be discussed in terms of quantity as well as quality. Women should have the capacity and position to influence decision-making and make meaningful contributions. Qualitative indicators can help to show whether women's participation is active and meaningful. Women should participate actively in the design of an activity or project or should be engaged in community activities e.g. maintenance of water infrastructure. To collect information on the quality of participation, you can ask women in community engagement activities whether they feel comfortable speaking up in public to give their opinion or complain. You can ask also if they perceive their contributions as having an impact on the final decisions. It is equally important to ask men about their perception of women's participation. Look beyond the number of women in a committee and their position and try to understand to what extent women have a voice in decisions.

Reflect on opportunities to redistribute unpaid work of women: Participation in rural water supply activities takes time and energy. Hence, some of the "women's responsibilities" may need to **be** taken up by men or other family members. It is important to be careful in adding unpaid work for women. On one hand, there needs to be an incentive for women to take an active role, as women may have little time to take on additional, unpaid roles. Examples of incentives include remuneration or recognition. However, some women wish to participate in water activities as a way of giving back to communities and are well aware of the social costs to them. Appropriate incentives should be determined in discussion with women and communities.

🔍 **Expert's advice:** Use this ladder of participation to monitor changes in women's participation over time and to identify barriers and strategies to overcome them. Investigate what types of women are able to move up the ladder while remembering the wide diversity of women.

Figure 4: Participation Ladder. *See Halcrow, G., et al. (2010). Working effectively with women and men in water, sanitation and hygiene programs: Learnings from research on gen-der outcomes from rural water, sanitation and hygiene projects in Vanuatu and Fiji.*

Factor 3: Engagement & inclusiveness

Engaging not only with women but with men and whole communities is key to overcome barriers to women's empowerment.

Engagement and inclusiveness myths or false beliefs: "Women added into water activities will spontaneously be accepted by communities ⚠ *and treated as men's equal."; "Focus on women only and leave men out of gender-focused project or program."; "There will be no objection or protests to women's empowerment."*

Facilitate community discussions: Encourage discussions on gender norms, barriers, and advantages to women's participation before and during an activity. Communities and men in particular should be sensitised to create space for women's involvement in water activities. Cultural constraints often prevent women from assuming more active roles and there is a risk that "what was meant to be a gender-sensitive committee of peers becomes instead a platform for reinforcing men's leadership and women's subordination"[7]. The level of acceptability and openness to women's involvement varies across communities. As your resources might be limited, start with communities that are already more 'open' to women's involvement.

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[7] Sam, Josephine-Mary, and Susan K. Todd. "Women as hand pump technicians: empowering women and enhancing participation in rural water supply projects." *Development in Practice* (2020): 1-12.

Support women by working with men: Including men in discussions on women's empowerment is key to reach full support at the community level. Likewise, it is necessary to understand gender dynamics at the household level. What are women's relationships with their spouses, in-laws, and children? Addressing women's needs, without accounting for their husbands' and male relative's needs, is one of the reasons why efforts to support women's empowerment fall short.

Take a proactive do-no-harm approach: Activities that aim to address inequalities can have unintended and negative outcomes. Mitigate unintended outcomes and backlash such as gender-based violence by taking a proactive approach and being aware of possible negative impacts. For this, know your context, acknowledge the fact that your activities may cause harm, and try to anticipate the potential risks. Prepare mitigation measures and remain flexible to react and adapt quickly.

Examples: The importance of including men and communities

1) As part of a project of a solar-powered borehole to an IDP camp in Abuja, Nigeria, a WASH Committee needed to be formed to oversee the maintenance and management of the borehole. During its establishment, the men in the community vehemently resisted the inclusion of women as part of the committee, asserting that in their 'culture', "women should not be given power".

2) In Samirah, Nigeria, patriarchy is a major obstacle in the north of the country, where women and children have a back seat position in all that matters in their lives. The approach of the Serendipity Healthcare Foundation has been able to contain part of it through continuous convincing of the district heads, traditional and religious heads so that they could buy into the idea of women participating.

3) Behaviour change programming at The Water Trust includes formal training and follow-on coaching of rural communities. The approach aims to address women's empowerment in several ways. First, increasing men's perception that helping with "housework" (encompassing WASH) is appropriate and part of a positive male identity in which they can take pride. Rebrand what it means to "be a man". This begins with a participatory community dialogue wherein the community discusses the different vulnerabilities and capacities of different community members, including men, women, children, elderly, people with disabilities, etc. Gender roles are discussed explicitly and the dialogue aims to facilitate a reconsideration of traditional gender roles.

4) Tearfund implemented a project in DRC affecting the roles and statuses of men and women. Including women in water management structures, water committees, and Beneficiary Reference Groups was viewed as contrary to local cultural norms and emasculating. Sensitisation on oppressive gender roles saw boys and men participating in traditionally female roles like collecting water. In addition to progressively changing what was perceived as 'women' and 'men' roles in the community, men contributing to household tasks freed up time for women. This improved their economic opportunities and allowed them to participate in other kinds of activities.

Examples shared during RWSN e-discussion on women's empowerment 2020.

Factor 4: power dynamics & structures

Explore existing structures and power dynamics, do not deny them but work with them. Identify supportive existing structures to work with.

Power dynamics & structures myths or false beliefs: "There is a one-fits-all approach without considering the local context and power structures."; "Impose new social structures and they will be accepted by community members."; "Men recognize the leadership of women into a leadership position."; "Rely on one female leader or a few individuals."

Understand power structures and dynamics: Understand the enablers and barriers that power structures create for women to occupy positions with meaningful roles. "An effective empowering participatory approach requires facilitation of a process that allows power imbalances to be addressed in the household and public domain. It takes into account how ownership of resources and assets and different levels of power shape roles, responsibilities, and opportunities, while monitoring changes over time."[8] Some questions a practitioner should ask in this context are: How is the community organized? What are the power structures in place and how do they work? How are women already engaging in leadership positions and what is the potential to do more? If there are no women in visible leadership, what is the potential for them to develop then from existing roles e.g. as leaders in families, cultural and traditional roles? One way to slowly allow power structures to change is to make visible what work rural women have done and are doing to ensure access to safe water.

Use existing structures that support women: There has been a tendency for rural water projects to impose new social structures, such as water user committees, that have no connection or legitimacy to existing social and political structures in the village or community. Such structures can often not be sustained without regular external support. On the other hand, strengthening existing structures, such as village councils can also entrench the existing exclusion of women or minorities. Well-designed strategies can bring sustained change in women's empowerment by identifying existing supportive structures such as existing women's groups.

Gain the acceptance of the local leaders: Involve and consult them from an early stage. In places where the local leader is a male leader, include him in the consultation or selection process if you intend to assign the project lead to women. This allows the designated female leaders to elevate their status and validate their importance in their community[9]. In some cases, having female leaders for exclusively female groups - e.g. teaching them how to ensure the maintenance of water infrastructures – has been a good practice. At a later stage, this might allow their recognition as community leaders by men in the areas of activities.

Favour collective leadership: Ensure that several women develop their leadership skills. The long-term development of water activities should not rely on too few individuals who could fall ill or leave the community. This will support to ensure the sustainability of the activities.

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[8] Ivens, Saskia. "Does increased water access empower women?." *Development* 51.1 (2008): 63-67.

[9] Smith, Maria A., et al. "Health promotion and disease prevention through sanitation education in South African Zulu and Xhosa women." *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 15.1 (2004): 62-68.

Examples: Working with existing systems and structures

1) In South Sudan, existing traditional structures like traditional women musical groups and women farmer's groups were used. They created songs on water provision and reinforced women's self-esteem.

2) It is important to work with both the civil society and local authorities (most of whom are men) to ensure a dialogue between men and women.

3) Example from Inter Aide: Women's testimonies showed that initially communities did not trust them and men always felt they had to supervise them. With time passing by and the number of activities growing, women have been able to make their proofs, gain trust, and convince elders of their capabilities.

4) In Nepal, as many men migrated away from villages, women got more involved and active in rainwater harvesting. This happened especially through 'mothers groups', which existed in all communities and advocated for change.

Examples shared by RWSN members during RWSN e-discussion and virtual workshop on women's empowerment 2020.

supporting this step, they need support to develop the capacity to influence the decisions of the committee.

Figure 5: Tahmina Begum supplying water from the Reverse Osmosis plant. She is the president of a women's cooperative group called 'Surovi Mohila Samity', which helps women in their community to empower themselves through becoming entrepreneurs. Dhoomghat, Iswaripur, Shyamnagar, Satkhira, Bangladesh. 21 October 2019. (© WaterAid/ HSBC/ Habibul Haque)

Factor 5: Capacity-building

Understand the needs and assets of women and offer sustainable capacity-building opportunities on a wide range of topics.

Capacity-building myths or false beliefs: "All women's needs and assets are similar."; "Technical skills and committee representation are the most important skills."; "Offer a one-off training without any compensation, and no follow-up support, and assume this will work."; "Build the capacity of individual women only."

Assess capacity needs and assets: Women's capacity assets and needs are diverse. It is important to discussing real needs with women to identify areas that require additional training and what areas to prioritize. Avoid systematically favouring one specific kind of capacity-building activity over the others.

Build capacity on diverse skills: Capacity development can include skills and knowledge in bookkeeping, business, community mobilization, conflict management, installation, maintenance, negotiation, peacebuilding, political leadership, procurement processes, and project management. For example, training women technicians can enhance women's empowerment, as it requires duties beyond committee representation and increases their visibility. Community members regard women then as skilled technicians and are most likely to recognise their voice and authority in water-related topics. Additionally, technical skills need to be completed with other skills that focus on agency such as confidence. Also, do not focus on service delivery for women, but rather work on capacity-building activities allowing them to be in different spaces and steps of the value chain. The most common approach in WASH projects has been to encourage women to be members of water management committees. This happened without considering that in some contexts women are not at all present in communal committees or the political sphere. Therefore, their inclusion in the committees can be too much of a change. Before

Think about the sustainability of the capacity-building process: Capacity-building is more than training. Providing access to networks (or creating networks if they do not exist) and control of income are important. Capacity-building activities should not add to the unpaid work of women, or women will stop attending. It is also important that they fit into the schedules of the participants, so the timing is important. When building capacity, consider also the risk of brain drain of women. Think about how to mitigate effects in such a situation.

Example 1: The creation of incentives for women
In South Sudan, women were organised into groups that do vegetable gardening using wastewater from boreholes. In turn, women collected water user fees and repaired the systems as soon as possible, because they valued the hand pump for helping their crops grow and thus had several economic benefits for them.

Example 2: Success and barriers in terms of capacity-building
In the district of Kilolo in the Iringa Region, Tanzania, a community was provided with several boreholes. Activities linked to women's empowerment took different forms: involvement in economic activities linked to WASH, work on self-belief, and recognition of capabilities for technical matters and decision making, training on entrepreneurship. Success factors included education, training and development skills, social protection, and access to property or assets like water kiosks, etc. Some barriers identified were the lack of education, unequal access to family assets/ownership and financial education, and the fact that women are usually involved mostly in household activities and not entrepreneurship and economic development activities.

Examples shared during RWSN e-discussion 2020

Stages of activities

The RWSN contains a wide diversity of public, private and development actors and many follow a concept to manage their water activities - consciously or unconsciously. The following model will aid practitioners in supporting women across the stages of their activities. In the first stage, you will attempt to understand the challenges in the local context. You will **identify** and analyse current institutions, needs, and barriers. When having identified one or several major challenges or bottlenecks that you intend to address, you will **design** and plan possible activities, before **implementing** them. Throughout the process, you will **monitor and evaluate** the status, failures, and successes of your activities. In a final stage, you will **report** your results, be it to the local community, to your clients or partners, and/or to the wider public. Based on these results, new measurements might be defined for the next round of water activities. Women's empowerment should be considered at all these stages of your activities. The following ideas can guide and strengthen your activities.
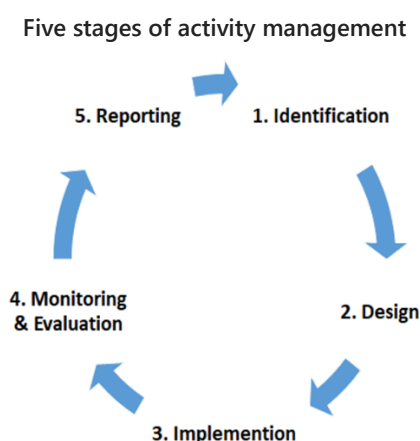
Five stages of activity management

Figure 6: Stages of activity management

There are five tables below: one for each stage of activity or project management. Within each table, each row represents one of the key elements to be considered. You can use the tables as checklists.

Identification	
👥	Identify local organisations and projects with skills and experience in women's empowerment
📜	Clarify relevant frameworks including relevant laws and policies
🧑	Investigate different social groups of women with different access to assets, resources, information, behaviour, tribal and cultural norms
📋	Explore women's needs with a needs assessment and social mapping on water access quantity and quality
⏳	Examine contextual definitions of empowerment with a baseline, and short- and long-term objectives
🚧	Understand barriers to empowerment
⛔	Review potential unintended negative impacts to prevent such as gender-based violence
🚻	Gender roles and power relations (men-women, women-women)
💬	Appropriate language(s) and tool(s) to gather feedback from the beginning

Design	
👥	Include prospective beneficiaries in the design and planning to consider cultural, social, and power factors that limit women's access to participation platforms.
⚛	Use participatory processes and methods e.g. Human-centred Design or Participatory Learning and Action-based method.
🧍	Design activities for different social groups of women and consider intersectionality e.g. age, life phases, specific roles.
🏃	Consider ways to overcome identified barriers and constraints.
♻	Ensure sustainable ownership of and access to water systems by women. Explore opportunities both during and after activities.
⚖	Remember not to overburden women. Partner with them to explore their recommendations.
⏱	Reflect on short and long-term effects, especially beyond a project period.

Implementation	
🔄	Remain flexible to adjust the initial design and correct your approach if needed.
🚩	Contextualise activities and adapt to the realities. Focus on activities, which specifically contribute to women's empowerment and adapt activities, which undermine this empowerment.
👭	Employ female role models in the implementation team. For women's empowerment within communities, women play a crucial role as enablers (as decision-makers, leaders, and technical staff, as part of the local government, service providers, and implementing partners).
🦸	Involve women leaders or other influential people in the community.

Figure 7: Fatimata Coulibaly and Awa Dembélé, both members of the Benkadi women's group, using an electric probe to measure the water level inside a well inside the market garden, Kakounouso, Samabogo, Circle of Bla, Segou Region, Mali, February 2019. (© WaterAid/ Basile Ouedraogo)

Monitoring & Evaluation

	Collect, at a minimum, sex-disaggregated data to monitor and evaluate male and female related outputs.
	Collect data at individual and household levels, including the gender and age of respondents and heads of households. This will support you to understand intra-household dynamics.
	Use quantitative, qualitative, and participatory approaches. For example, the ratio of women at key positions should be measured, but also changes in communities' perception. Participatory approaches can use micro-narratives, photography or transect walks.
	Review opportunities to engage women through participatory monitoring or communal monitoring, which brings communal accountability and responsibility.
	Employ a feedback mechanism at the community level. Depending on the context, this might be a whistle-blowing 24/7 hotline available to report potential incidents, or a Beneficiary Reference Groups with community noticeboards and suggestion boxes.
	Use monitoring data to adjust and strengthen activities.
	Consider team member skills needed to analyse and use the data and how to ensure the quality of data from the start.

Reporting

	Report, at a minimum, sex-disaggregated data in all reporting mechanisms.
	Communicate results to local people in an easy to understand way, including local and traditional leaders and in the local language. When activity failures occur, it is key to communicate them to women, but also men and leaders.
	Ensure communication of interim results throughout all stages.
	Learn from success and failures. Lessons learnt need to feed back to capacity building, training, education, and sensitisation for all groups (men and women) and finally to the (next) design of activities.

Concluding remarks & Outlook

Many development practitioners acknowledge that higher effectiveness and sustainability can be achieved when women and men are equally involved in WASH programs. Consequentially, the policy rationale behind the importance of addressing gender issues in WASH has often been related to enhanced efficiency instead of empowerment or gender equality. However, empowerment as a component of WASH interventions should be both a cause and an outcome of successful gender-sensitive WASH programs. Practitioners should guard against using women as instruments for better function systems. **Empowerment, therefore, should be a strategic objective in itself** with targeted activities, instruments, and monitoring tools. It should not be treated as a bonus activity to increase the sustainability or effectiveness of systems, thus making women instruments of the process.

External stressors impact water supply and women's empowerment. Rural areas are very diverse environments that are being impacted by climate change, conflict, and political fragility in different ways and at different rates. Extreme events can impact water supply and increase migration out of rural areas, coupled with the scarcity of food and other basic resources. These changes can exacerbate challenges for women and girls. Moreover, rapid social and economic change due to globalisation has impacted rural areas through increased access to transport, mass, and social media. Access to transport, media, and technology is often gendered. This has pulled many young people and men of all ages, to cities and other countries to find work and opportunities, leaving behind women to care for children, the elderly, and those who are physically or mentally impaired. This pressure can force girls out of education early to support their mothers, thus reducing their opportunities in life.

Practitioners aiming to address the dual goals of gender equality and water supply in rural communities have a unique opportunity to engage and support women – ultimately with aiming of seeing them empowered. The five factors of empowerment and practical steps highlighted in this guide, aim to build confidence within the practitioner community to better support women throughout the process of water systems strengthening. **This transformative practice is about involving women in all their diversity and recognizing that gender inequalities related to water are deeply ingrained in social and cultural structures**. While working hard to not place the burden on women for change, we aim to walk beside women as their lives change. We seek to invite, encourage, trust, and support women to be agents of change for a resource that is integral to their lives.

This guide is one contribution from RWSN towards women's empowerment in the water sector. As a global network of rural water supply professionals and organisations committed to improving their knowledge, competence and professionalism, **RWSN will not stop here; the guide will be accompanied by ongoing dialogue and activities for the members of the network, so stay tuned!**

Annex: List of tools

The list of tools below has been provided by RWSN members and gender experts throughout the collaborative process, as well from a literature review realised by the co-authors. Even though not being an exhaustive list, we hope that the selection of tools supports you in your rural water and gender activities. If you feel that any valuable tool is missing, we appreciate you sending it to the RWSN secretariat at ruralwater@skat.ch.

Action piece: Gender equality and inclusion in water resources management

This Action Piece presents the key ingredients to support gender equality and inclusion in water resources management and sectoral water uses. The aim is to demystify how organisations can take initial and necessary steps towards increasing gender equality.

GRANT, MELITA. "About the Global Water Partnership." (2017).

A framework for exploring gender equality outcomes from WASH programmes

This Framework for exploring gender equality outcomes from WASH programmes assists practitioners and researchers in planning, identifying, and documenting gender outcomes associated with WASH programs with a conceptual framework for classifying gender equality changes.

Carrard, Naomi, et al. "A framework for exploring gender equality outcomes from WASH programmes." *Waterlines (2013)*: 315-333.

Water for Women Fund Portal

Water for Women is a WASH program funded by Australian Aid and supporting improved health, equality and wellbeing in Asian and Pacific communities through socially inclusive and sustainable WASH projects. Water for Women is delivering 18 WASH projects in 15 countries together with 11 research projects (2018-2022). This portal contains highlights from the learnings of the program.

https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/learning-and-resources/resources-and-tools.aspx

Working effectively with women and men in WASH programs

Working effectively with women and men in water, sanitation and hygiene programs: Learnings from research on gender outcomes from rural water, sanitation and hygiene projects in Vanuatu and Fiji, is a guide aiming to assist program and field staff involved in the design, implementation, and/or evaluation of community-based WASH programs to work effectively with women and men.

Halcrow, G., et al. "Working effectively with women and men in water, sanitation and hygiene programs: Learnings from research on gender outcomes from rural water, sanitation and hygiene projects in Vanuatu and Fiji." (2010).

Gender Norms in the field: how to facilitate a dialogue between men and women – developed by WaterAid

Between 2013 and 2016, WaterAid developed "Exploring gender aspects of community water, sanitation and hygiene: a manual for facilitating dialogue between women and men in communities." The manual is used to guide discussions and activities about gender norms with communities at five key points of WASH project implementation.

Toolkit: Violence, Gender and WASH

Violence, Gender and WASH: Making water, sanitation and hygiene safer through improved programming and services, is a practitioners' toolkit that is relevant to development, humanitarian and transitional contexts. It was developed in response to an acknowledgment that although the lack of access to appropriate WASH is not the root cause of violence, it can lead to increased vulnerabilities to violence.

The toolkit has been developed by Sarah House, Suzanne Ferron, Dr. Marni Sommer, and Sue Cavill, on behalf of WaterAid with contributions from a wide range of actors. It has been funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the British Government through the Sanitation and Hygiene Applied Research For Equity (SHARE) Consortium.

MOOC: Social Norms, Social Change

The free Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) Social Norms, Social Change by UNICEF, and the University of Pennsylvania introduce all the basic concepts and definitions that help us distinguish between different types of social practices like customs, descriptive norms, and social norms. Part 2 examines the essentials of intervention strategies, including legal reforms, information campaigns, economic incentives, and group deliberations, and a variety of tools to effect change, highlight the role of trendsetters in social change and explore the conditions under which they can be successful.

Methodology for participatory assessments

The Methodology for participatory assessments with communities, institutions and policymakers helps project managers engage all parts of the community, not just the leaders and more vocal members. The methodology applies to monitoring but also preparation.

Dayal, Rekha, Christine Van Wijk, and Nilanjana Mukherjee. "Methodology for participatory assessments." *With communities, institutions and policymakers* (2000).

Participatory evaluation: Tools for managing change in water and sanitation provides ideas about participatory processes and indicators that can be used to involve community members in program evaluation. It draws on fifteen years of experience in twenty countries.

Narayan, Deepa. *Participatory evaluation: Tools for managing change in water and sanitation*. The World Bank, 1993.

Improving gender data on WASH is key

An interesting toolkit was developed in 2019 by women for water partnership and UNESCO, and provide practitioners with 4 tools to monitor the effects of their programs/projects:

- I. 'Gender-responsive indicators for water assessment, monitoring and reporting' features **105 gender-responsive indicators** in 10 priority topics aligned with the 2030 Agenda;

- II. 'Methodology for the collection of sex-disaggregated water data' describes the **methodology for data collection**;

- III. '**Guidelines** on the collection of sex-disaggregated water data' gives an overview of common data collection methods for different users and regions, whereas;

IV. 'Questionnaire for the collection of sex-disaggregated water data', lists **364 questions with suggested methodologies** for data collection.

Gender and WASH Monitoring Tool – developed by Plan International Australia

The Gender and WASH Monitoring Tool focuses on monitoring changes in gender relations with women and men in the implementation of WASH-related initiatives. It comprises a series of participatory rural appraisal activities and preparatory training relevant for practitioners.

A guide on measuring women's empowerment – developed by Oxfam

How to guide on measuring women's empowerment is an easy and practical guide and tool, but is not focused on the water sector. It shares experiences and lessons learned to support other evaluators and practitioners who seek to pin down this 'hard-to-measure' concept. This tool aims to provide a context-specific composite index for the measurement of women's empowerment. While the framework itself remains constant, the specific characteristics and relevant indicators of empowerment are defined differently in each evaluation to enable users to build a context-specific composite index.

Empowerment in water, sanitation and hygiene index

The Empowerment in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Index (EWI) is a novel survey-based index designed to measure agency, participation, and empowerment in the water and sanitation sector. Designed to model the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), the EWI can be used to assess the empowering aspects of WASH intervention and to monitor changes over time. It contains indicators at the individual, household, and societal levels.

Dickin, Sarah, et al. "Empowerment in water, sanitation and hygiene index." World Development 137: 105158.

Gender Equality Measure for WASH – the WASH-GEM

Designed in partnership with the DFAT Water for Women fund, the water, sanitation and hygiene gender equality measure (WASH-GEM) explores resources, agency, critical consciousness, structures, and wellbeing built on a depth of gender equality and WASH literature. It can be used to assess gender outcomes within WASH interventions over time focusing on gender dynamics within WASH programs.

https://waterforwomen.uts.edu.au/gender/

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MacArthur, Jess, Naomi Carrard, and Juliet Willetts. "WASH and Gender: a critical review of the literature and implications for gender-transformative WASH research." Journal of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Development (2020).

Sam, Josephine-Mary, and Susan K. Todd. "Women as hand pump technicians: empowering women and enhancing participation in rural water supply projects." Development in Practice (2020): 1-12.

Smith, Maria A., et al. "Health promotion and disease prevention through sanitation education in South African Zulu and Xhosa women." Journal of Transcultural Nursing 15.1 (2004): 62-68.

About the Authors

The two **editors and main co-authors** are both members of the RWSN Secretariat team.

Elodie Feijoo Seara (Skat Consulting for Skat Foundation) holds a Master's degree in Development Studies from IHEID Geneva, Switzerland. Specialized in water governance, Elodie acquired, throughout her interdisciplinary studies, work experience, but also engagement in many associations, knowledge and experience on crosscutting topics beyond water: youth, gender, environment and migration. Working on such a guide that aims to bridge between water engineers and gender experts was thus a perfect fit. Building on her experience as facilitator of water-related knowledge networks (RWSN & SDC's Water Network RésEAU) enabled her to co-lead the collaborative writing process and editing of this guide.

Sandra Fürst (Skat Consulting for Skat Foundation) is a development professional who combines her technical and methodological expertise in climate-resilient water and food systems with her passion to design and implement sustainable innovations for rural livelihoods at scale. Years of work experience in the water and food sector, from IWMI in Burkina Faso to Africa Rice and GIZ in Benin, as well as her expertise of participatory, innovative methods and strategic planning, allowed her to co-lead the collaborative writing process of this guide.

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