



gender and water and sanitation

East Timor Red Cross is working with local volunteers to rehabilitate and protect water sources, construct family latrines, school toilets and hand-washing facilities. Photo: Australian Red Cross/Mario Jonny dos Santos

Overview

This briefing paper looks at the importance of gender within Red Cross programs and services and offers some suggestions about how Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies might integrate gender into water and sanitation programs and strategies.

This paper can be used as a tool during gender training, as an information sheet for staff and volunteers, at the governance level, and as part of education or advocacy activities within a Society.

Gender: an integral part of water and sanitation programs

In almost every country and culture, women collect, transport, use and manage domestic water. As primary water managers and family carers, the involvement of women is critical to successful water and sanitation activities.

Despite this, many programs do not involve women and the planning and building of water and sanitation infrastructure is seen as 'men's work'.

Experience over the past few decades suggests a strong link between a focus on gender in planning and design, and women's participation and management in the success and sustainability of water and sanitation initiatives.



*Health volunteers in Solomon Islands are trained to share information about hygiene with their communities.
Photo: Australian Red Cross/Mel Tolnay*

Involving women

Water and sanitation projects involving both women and men provide range of benefits in the design, management and maintenance of projects:

- Improved technical design of water infrastructure making it more appropriate to local needs, conditions and cultures.
- More convenient location of water outlets to meet local needs and benefit the community more equitably.
- Increased likelihood that water supplies will be sustainable - women are often better able to locate traditional water sources or provide information about how long particular water stores will last.

- Improved care and maintenance of water supply infrastructure.
- Improvements in the sanitation of the surrounding environment.
- Increased chances of cost recovery - women's contributions should not be judged only by their active participation in things like the construction of wells.
- Enhanced hygiene awareness.

Community benefits

There are substantial benefits for women and their communities when water and sanitation activities provide better access to water:

- Economic and social benefits - better access to water allows more time for food preparation, work, family, welfare and leisure.
- Benefits for children - girls often have the opportunity to go to school once free of having to collect water.
- Involvement of women in the planning and management of water can often be a significant step to building opportunities for women's participation and confidence in public decision making.

A closer look at gender and water and sanitation

As women are the main users and managers of domestic water, and usually the primary carer in a household, their involvement in the planning, management and evaluation of water and sanitation programs is extremely important.

Women's roles and needs	Implications for water and sanitation
Women are the primary users and managers of domestic water supplies.	Consulting with women may bring many benefits, such as information about where underground water supplies are, where water outlets should be located, and how best to manage infrastructure.
Women are often responsible for the care of family, food preparation and domestic cleaning.	Women need convenient access to water at meal times and when children are bathed. The location of outlets and water maintenance activities should take these needs into account.
Women are often responsible for the care of domestic animals and for home gardens.	Estimates for water use should include the use of water for gardens and livestock as well as domestic needs.
Many women wash, do laundry and exchange information at water collection points.	Women need to be consulted on the design of water outlet points.
Privacy and the convenience of latrine and bathing facilities are high priorities for women.	Women are more likely to value latrines and bathing facilities and maintain them if they are attached to individual households.
Women need access to water for washing and bathing during their menstrual cycle.	Privacy concerns need to be discussed with women.
Women and girls are often accompanied by small children when water is collected.	Water outlets and tap designs need to take into account safety issues and the risk that children may damage them.
Women usually care for sick family members	Women are more likely to experience the impact of accessing potable water supplies for family health.
Women are often responsible for the day-to-day care of children.	Sanitation messages that target women are likely to result in these messages being passed on to children.
Women may be reluctant to take on roles that require involvement in public affairs.	Talk to women about what they can do, make meetings at times when women can participate, and give them support when they take on new roles.



Photo: Australian Red Cross/Tim Page



Photo: Australian Red Cross/Kathleen Walsh

Men's roles and needs	Implications for water and sanitation
As women tend to take responsibility for food preparation, men may not be as conscientious about boiling water, particularly when working away from home.	Community water supply systems need to be accompanied by information about waterborne diseases and their prevention, and both men and women both need to be targeted.
Men are less likely to pay attention to messages about personal hygiene – such as hand washing and use of latrines.	Getting sanitation messages to men may be more challenging than for women. Different strategies and messages may be needed.
Men have needs for water that are different to women, such as for food processing.	Men need to be consulted with about their needs.
Men often have the technical skills and tools needed to build, maintain and repair water infrastructure and latrines.	Women may be left without facilities if maintenance and repairs are not undertaken in a timely manner.

Making gender work

Technical, social and cultural factors influence the design and management of water and sanitation projects. Here are some suggestions for incorporating gender into your planning:

Gender considerations

- Provide gender training for men and women staff and volunteers. Women may not necessarily have an understanding of the gender dimensions of water and sanitation programs and likewise, men may not have an understanding of women's needs in water and sanitation.
- Recruit people with a sound understanding of gender for planning and assessment teams. Choose staff who have a willingness to listen and a cultural sensitivity.

Planning

- Develop surveys to gather information about water and sanitation needs, practices and constraints from a gender perspective.
- In addition to technical considerations, include criteria requiring appropriate representation of women on water user groups and planning committees.

Support

- Support women to take on decision-making and management roles. Ensure there is more than one woman on a committee. Give them responsibility for tasks that they are already good at, or recognised for, and provide them with training and mentoring when they take on new roles.
- Include at least one woman on any team that is consulting with communities. Cultural constraints and women's reluctance to speak, particularly about topics such as menstruation, make it important to have female representation.
- Provide training for, and give responsibility to women and men for the maintenance and repair of water and sanitation infrastructure.
- Consider talking to women and men in separate groups. Women may talk more freely when they are around other women. Men too may feel more comfortable about expressing themselves when women are not present.

Communication

Develop gender sensitive health communications strategies and materials. Examine men and women's behaviours and target messages to those who need them most. For example, men may be vulnerable to waterborne diseases when working away from home through not boiling water.



*Villagers no longer have to walk all day to collect water in Longhe, China - they simply turn on a tap.
Photo: Australian Red Cross/Li Feng*

Management and training

Responsibilities

Responsibility for reporting and planning gender sensitive strategies should be part of the program coordinator and/or team leader's responsibilities. Gender responsibilities should also be included in the job descriptions of all team members.

Tools

Develop easy-to-use and relevant tools for use by staff and volunteers. Adapt and use tools from the web to support staff and volunteers.

Reporting

Make information collection tools and reporting formats gender sensitive.

Training

Develop a separate training program on gender and integrate gender across all training programs.

Use the Federation CD Rom *Training Pack on Gender Issues* and other suitable tools (Australian Red Cross International Program holds copies of these resources).

Sometimes it can be useful to use an experienced gender trainer to help develop a tailored training program and/or to modify existing materials.

Recruitment

Recruit men and women as staff and volunteers. Gender sensitive recruitment should be part of an overall strategy - not only to ensure gender balance - but also so that all new staff and volunteers have an understanding of and sensitivity to gender issues.

This may involve holding community forums to explain why both men and women are needed for programs, and recruiting in alternative ways (i.e. hiring people without literacy skills - in some communities this is most often women - when the role doesn't require literacy).

Further reading

Information for this paper has been drawn from:

The Asian Development Bank website
www.adb.org/Documents/Manuals/Gender_Checklists/Water

International Rescue Committee: Gender and WES
www.irc.nl/page/102
(Provides links to themes about water supply and sanitation, including a site on gender equity, water and livelihood and school sanitation.)

AusAID guidelines and checklist that cover water supply and sanitation
www.usaid.gov/au/publications/pdf/gender_guidelines_water.pdf