

## DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES THROUGH WOMEN AND WATER

Gemma Kite – Inter Aide Sierra Leone

There are many important reasons why women should be more involved in a community water resources project. In order to have more women participation, we need to better understand the role women play and how access to water can improve not only their own development but expand to many other opportunities. This note aims at giving some clues to increase women's participation for decisions related to the management and maintenance of a collective good, the water supply infrastructure.

Let's first understand gender roles in Sierra Leone, and women's daily responsibilities in the family:

1. Gathering wood, fetching water, washing clothes
2. Cooking food
3. Taking care of children (washing, feeding, health care, etc.)
4. Farm work for husband or other family member (not their own income generating)
5. Others?

The proof is in the pudding! Women are very connected to water resources due to their traditional roles and responsibilities in using water. They play a central role in water resource issues in their communities. Added to that, World Food Program reports that women reinvest 90% of their income in their families, while men reinvest... 40% of their income<sup>1</sup>.

The introduction (or restoration) of clean and safe water source, is an opportunity to increase the participation of women and to empower them to take a more active role in collective decision & management processes.

### Different effects are to be expected on women's livelihood

- ⇒ Cleaner water means better health and nutrition for women and their families
- ⇒ Decrease the distance to the water source



#### Meaning

1. Less health problems for women (carrying heavy loads over distance) and family (less water borne diseases)
2. Reduce time burden - more time for women to focus on generating income activities
3. Increase in school attendance for girls. *In sub Saharan Africa, fewer than 1 in 5 girls make it to secondary school (Gibbs, 2011). The lack of access to clean water is an obstacle in their education. Continuing in education is empowering and rewarding for women in less developed countries. An extra year of primary school raises girls' eventual wages by 10-20%, and an extra year of secondary school adds 15%-25%. (Gibbs, 2011) This allows for greater economic growth in countries as well as providing women a way to provide for themselves, rather than relying on men. Although there may be other factors to why girls do not continue their education, the need to gather water from sources far away from home keeps girls from being able to attend school. With closer water comes greater self-esteem and better school attendance by girls.*
4. Increase opportunity for women to achieve more (education, income)

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wfp.org/content/best-investment>

**Why:** Because women are so connected with water issues, and because there is the potential for so many positive outcomes to affect them, it is very important to include women in the planning of water projects.

1. Women's knowledge of water – location, seasonality, management & maintenance operations etc.
2. Increase equity with male counterparts – both men and women contribute to society

➔ **Having women actively participate in the planning and management of their water sources may lead to the following outcomes:**

- Women's roles in skilled work in project implementation and management
- Women's representation in community decision-making forums
- Women's increased awareness of the health and hygiene aspects of water management
- Women's participation in productive income generation activities, made possible through time saved in fetching water
- Potential increase of equity between men and women as contributors to society.

**Women need to participate actively in water projects at the community level. Structural barriers which inhibit women from uniformly, effectively and strategically participate in water management must be removed.**

**How** can we ensure that women participate actively in the planning and management?

- Hold "women only" meetings in the preparatory phase – explain clearly the positive impacts to women and girls if they actively contribute to the water project
- Interact with women in the community to encourage their participation
- Ensure fair representation of women in Users' Committee and in decision-making processes
- Rely on women opinions for site selection, for activities related to money contribution & management, for maintenance issues...
- Make sure that women are not coerced into a committee or nominated in silence
- Think about the women who DO participate, why and how they have participated?
- Learn about the social realities at the community level in order to bring about real change

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