



WHEN COUPLES WORK TOGETHER FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Empowering and actively involving women to sustain WASH services

The Amhara Integrated Rural Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (AIRWASH) Project in Ethiopia works with both men and women to enhance women's participation and to allow women to voice their needs in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) related activities. Couples are trained together and make visits to other regions to share and learn from other people's experiences, which they then draw on in order to build gender sensitivity into their own monthly community meetings. Changes have been observed in couples' attitudes and behaviour. Not only are their actions more inclusive and sensitive to the differing needs of men and women, but the couples also act as promoters of good WASH practices. Very soon, their discussions transcend purely WASH-related issues and the participating couples start to address issues such as domestic violence. This gives us hope that the approach can encourage actors in society to promote greater gender equality. It also increases the sustainability of WASH services.

THE CONTEXT

As in most villages of Amhara region in Ethiopia, the chore of fetching water for household needs is part of daily life for women in Meha kebele. They suffer from diseases linked to poor sanitation and hygiene. Living in a highly patriarchal society, they are at risk of domestic violence, which often stems from issues of water provision or management for household consumption. The multiple burdens on women due to poor access to WASH services are clearly visible in these villages.

The project team identified a number of gender gaps. Compared to unmarried women, married women were less informed about their right to clean and safe water, adequate sanitation and hygiene, and gender equality. As a result, married women considered WASH services to be a gift from the government rather than a human right. They therefore did not actively engage in planning or implementing WASH services in their communities.

On the basis of this analysis, the project focused its capacity building on empowering married women and men, and involving them more centrally in the planning, implementation and management of the WASH services.

With the aim of respecting cultural norms but also modifying them overtime, the project addressed households rather than simply women and invited husbands and wives to come to the various capacity-building activities together.



Workinesh Assefa and her husband Belay Mazengia receiving an award for their achievements in WASH activities, gender equality, and mobilizing other villagers

Workinesh Assefa says, “My husband and I participated side by side in a training session, something that had never happened before this project started. Before the training and experience-sharing visit to Awuramba community, my husband used to leave the household activities to me, even though I spent the whole day in the field, taking care of agricultural tasks. When I went to the stream to fetch water in the morning and spent many hours queuing, he wouldn’t prepare breakfast and feed the children. So they went to school with empty stomachs, and we often quarrelled about it. Since the project started, everything has changed in my family and my village. Now we have clean and safe water from the hand-dug well in front of our house. We use a latrine, my husband helps me to fetch water and care for our children, and all of us are healthy! Besides, I am a WASHCO member and have played a role in mobilizing women and men of our village.”



Birhanu Wale and his wife, Marie Workie, fetching water together from the new hand-dug well.

APPROACH

In consultation with our woreda (district) and kebele partners, we selected Meha as the first village, and 26 couples, three single women and three facilitators took part in the training process. Training consisted of structured sessions, experience sharing, an exchange visit and community discussions. The events were held in the early afternoon around water points – a time and place favoured by the women. The training focused on gender issues and gender mainstreaming in WASH, covering aspects of gender division of labour as a social construct, women's and girls' burden in domestic water supply and management, women's unpaid domestic work, the importance of managing the water point properly, problems related to poor sanitation and hygiene, and social inclusion. Shortly after the training process, the couples participated in a one-day experience-sharing visit to the nearby community of Awuramba, which has a regional and national reputation for ensuring gender equality and social inclusion. During the visit the couples learned about waste disposal and management, water infrastructure management, improved latrine building, the installation of hand-washing facilities, and care and support to elderly and disabled people. The refresher training sessions covered issues of cost recovery, maintaining personal hygiene, ensuring water safety and quality from source to mouth, mutual understanding between husband and wife, the damage caused by domestic violence, and women's active participation in decision-making and community auditing. Through collaboration and joint analysis of practical WASH-related issues, the participants also started to discuss gendered roles and gender equality. This was the first time this kind of capacity-building process had ever been put forward in Amhara region and it generated a great deal of interest.

KEY RESULTS

The approach put wives and husbands on a level playing field to experience gender inequality, sanitation and hygiene, and water point management as equals, side by side. The process changed their perceptions about the other's needs and also gave them the ability to grasp complex issues. It quickly disproved the belief that women can only receive information through their husbands and have little to contribute to decision-making. The couples attended community meetings together, which helped the women in particular to develop self-confidence. As their self-confidence grew, their active involvement in all WASH activities increased dramatically, resulting in increased ownership of WASH services. The exchange visits played a crucial role, as the participants could easily absorb the lessons from others like them and then put them into practice.

There were several concrete benefits for the community. Women were fully engaged in site selection and tech-

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« Before the project, we were ignorant about many things. Women suffered; they did not know their rights and were unable to stand up for their rights. But after the project's training sessions, experience-sharing visit and community discussions, everything has changed and we now lead a better and peaceful life thanks to the project. »

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Dasash Alemu, a married woman from Meha Kebele

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nology choice during the installation of hand-dug wells. Women and men contributed labour on the building site and mobilized construction inputs such as sand, cement and gravel. Once the work was completed, men and women worked together to set up operation and maintenance systems for the newly constructed water points. In line with the government directive, three of the five members on the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Committees (WASHCO) are women. Unlike in the past, the three women are fully competent for their new responsibilities, and their husbands do not take over their position on the committee. The training sessions and experience-sharing visit helped both men and women to enhance their participation at all levels of WASH activities and effectively fulfil their roles on the WASHCO. In addition, the trained couples led many other actions in the village. The women pushed their husbands to construct pit latrines, as they realized that the latrines provided them with privacy during the daytime – a key constraint for women without toilets that leads them to eat and drink less during the day. Some husbands bought sanitary pads for their wives, as they had understood that menstruation is natural. Moreover, the couples now share the household care and management workload.

Today, women participate actively in community meetings and openly express their views. All households use pit latrines, contribute cash towards the maintenance and operation of the water scheme, and plant seedlings around their water points.

Going beyond the remit of WASH, the villagers constructed a community hall to conduct monthly meetings, at which they discuss various issues such as sanitation, hygiene, the gender division of labour, and the use and management of water schemes.

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« I am truly impressed by the women's presence and how they express their views openly at this community meeting. How have you changed the people's attitude? In other kebeles of the woreda we really struggle to involve women in such meetings.»

Esayas Desta, head of the woreda/district administration office during a visit to the Meha kebele, 2016

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LESSONS LEARNT

- Women's full participation in WASH activities is only possible if the time and place of the training sessions is scheduled for their convenience and they are taken through the various steps of community meetings, trainings and discussions.
- The training helped married women to get the same access to information, education and technology regarding WASH services as their husbands, and enabled them to develop self-confidence and increase their stake in WASH.
- As married women participated in the capacity-building process alongside their husband, they both fully understood the concepts of and approaches to sanitation and hygiene, as well as how to manage water points, allowing for effective and efficient implementation of the community's WASH activities.
- Couple capacity building enabled men and women to understand and analyse the traditional gender division of labour and make changes based on mutual consent and respect within the household, which soon expanded to community level. This is an organic and sustainable process for triggering societal change.

CHALLENGES & PERSPECTIVES

Some challenges remain. The process is time-consuming, as high levels of illiteracy and patriarchal attitudes are important constraints that still need to be overcome. The approach was able to be implemented with the help of continuous follow-up, exchange visits and awareness-raising sessions, but the dissemination of the approach continues to be a challenge. Follow-up meetings and community discussions are still needed to help the community adopt new ways of thinking and collaboration.

Accompanying this kind of change process is relatively resource-intensive. It also requires well-qualified training and facilitation staff. Training and facilitation capacities will therefore need to be built up within the government so that it integrates this approach into its traditional approach to WASH programmes. Local authorities are crucial partners in the next steps, so the approach should be refined and integrated into local government capacity-building programmes, while exploring ways of making it less resource-intensive. The project staff will now prepare guidelines and offer training and coaching to Woreda staff members interested in adopting the approach.

REFERENCE

- Capacity building to couples for community and women empowerment and effective and efficient implementation of WASH approaches: The case of the Amhara Integrated Rural Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Project, Ethiopia; article by Nigussie Mihretu and Gedif Ewnetu, 7 September 2016 accepted and presented at the Rural Water Supply Network Forum 2016 in Abidjan; Côte d'Ivoire
- Project details: https://ethiopia.helvetas.org/en/projects/amhara_integrated_rural_wash__airwash__project/

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