

“GENDER EQUALITY TODAY FOR A SUSTAINABLE TOMORROW”

COWASH and Gender Equality

1. Introduction

The theme for International Women’s Day, 8 March 2022 (IWD 2022) is, “**Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow**”, recognizing the contribution of women and girls around the world, who are leading the charge on climate change adaptation, mitigation, and response, to build a more sustainable future for all.

Advancing gender equality in the context of the climate crisis and disaster risk reduction is one of the greatest global challenges of the 21st century. The issues of climate change and sustainability have had and will continue to have severe and lasting impacts on our environment, economic and social development. Those who are amongst the most vulnerable and marginalized, experience the deepest impacts. Women are increasingly being recognized as more vulnerable to climate change impacts than men, as they constitute the majority of the world’s poor and are more dependent on the natural resources that climate change threatens the most.



At the same time, women and girls are effective and powerful leaders and change-makers for climate adaptation and mitigation. They are involved in sustainability initiatives around the world, and their participation and leadership result in more effective climate action. Continuing to examine the opportunities, as well as the constraints, to empower women and girls to have a voice and be equal players in decision-making related to climate change and sustainability is essential for sustainable development and greater gender equality. Without gender equality today, a sustainable future, and an equal future remains beyond our reach.¹

¹ UN Women, International Women’s Day 2022: “Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow”, December 03, 2022. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/announcement/2021/12/international-womens-day-2022-gender-equality-today-for-a-sustainable-tomorrow>

Different development actors in addition to the government are working on different sectors to realize women's meaningful contribution to the development work. COWASH is among the development actors working in Ethiopia for the last 11 years in the WASH sector.

2. Impact statement and outcomes of COWASH IV in relation to gender equality

Community-led Accelerated WASH (COWASH) is a bilateral project between the Government of Ethiopia and the Government of Finland focused on the implementation of water supply, sanitation, and hygiene for the rural community of Ethiopia. The project has passed through three phases dated from July 2011 and March 2021. COWASH IV, with four years implementation period, has started in April 2021 aimed at achieving its impact statement of "Improved public health and well-being, social development and climate resilience in the communities in the Project area²".

From the five outcomes of COWASH IV, Outcome 4 "Sustainability and inclusivity of achieved WASH outcomes enhanced" is the one directly related to women empowerment and inclusiveness. To meet this outcome, different activities are planned to be executed.

3. COWASH in practice in women empowerment

When any institution, organization, or individual enters the workforce, it says that our work involves the community, especially women. In practice, however, in many projects the community is not engagement and the community is not clear about the project. In most cases, when development works are executed, the focus is on how to meet the current demand of the community. Its sustainability is not that much a worry. Even the community themselves are often more interested to get benefit from the development work without consideration of its adverse effect on the environment, next generation and needs of women and girls.

COWASH gives special emphasis to inclusiveness in general and women's involvement in particular in its project implementation process. It starts from planning, conducting participatory planning sessions with the involvement of different partners and stakeholders to make sure gender equality and women empowerment are mainstreamed in each project and each activity. Through continuous monitoring, the project assures ground-level implementation. The construction of water facilities is a priority of every level of the community.

Water is life for all the people of the world. For women, water is more than anything else. In the past, women, however, had a relatively small role to play in decision-making. COWASH has come a long way in understanding this and has made significant strides, especially in the area of women's decision-making in the design, use, management and financing of water facilities.

² https://www.cmpethiopia.org/media/cowash_4_project_document2



In many cases, the practice and attitude of the community do not allow women to urinate or defecate openly in the field daytime. When women and girls menstruate, they have difficulties having a private space to manage their menstruation. In some communities in Ethiopia when a woman or girl is menstruating the use of the common bathroom is not accepted by men's family members and this forces women and girls to open defecation. COWASH had worked with relevant stakeholders to break these deadlocks through education and behavioral change tools.

To overcome these stereotypes, the project has undertaken a number of awareness creation activities. A sense of self-awareness is created by making the community feel that any water and sanitation project construction is their own and that the community and specific women have always been involved in the processes of project implementation.

COWASH's contribution to women's decision-making is significant. The role of women in decision-making in the water supply level has increased. According to the baseline survey report (May 2020) findings; the Percent of women WASHCO members increased from 33.3% during the baseline to 40.9% at the end line (i.e. out of 1,565 WASHCO members elected for 289 water supply schemes by all actors, women reported to be 640) and the percentage of women who have chairperson position increased from 4.3% during the baseline to 10.5% at the end line irrespective of their level of performance. Women and girls now easily use more water for services such as baby-wash, cooking, and laundry in the near distance. According to an article prepared by Mr. Arto Suominen

“Time saved by women and girls by COWASH one million euros saved each day by reducing their traveling and waiting time to fetch water³”.

³ Arto Suominen, Time Saved by Women and Girls in COWASH
<https://www.cmpethiopia.org/content/download/6643/24706/file/Time%20saved%20by%20women%20and%20girls%20in%20COWASH.zip>

Women's and girls' sanitation is evolving with improved technology, and COWASH is doing its part to make it safer, easier to use, and provide more privacy for women and girls to use. Alongside this, the opportunity is being created for young people by introducing women-led sanitation marketing enterprises. These enterprises produce and sell different sanitation materials and equipment for the interested households.

COWASH is also doing its part to build and improve water and sanitation in schools and health facilities. The toilets being built for institutions are accessible for persons with disability and include separate units for girls, boys, and teachers. The services are also extended to include menstrual hygiene management rooms for girls in need.

As a result, with the launch of COWASH, various organizations today recognize the importance of accessibility by women and persons with disabilities to water and sanitation facilities and other opportunities to participate in the project implementation and management.

4. Conclusion

In general, COWASH not only promotes the development of projects in the community and creates a sense of ownership in the community including women and persons with disabilities but also builds the capacity of stakeholders and built a huge number of water supply and sanitation facilities in the community. The role of women in decision-making in WASH plays a key role in alleviating the living costs of women.



Therefore, recognizing that COWASH is a project that is building community-centered, non-judgmental, generational communities, all stakeholders should play their part in the participation and benefit of women in their programs and projects.

“GENDER EQUALITY TODAY FOR A SUSTAINABLE TOMORROW”