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Role and participation of women in the management of community-managed water systems in rural areas of Uganda and it's impact on the livelihoods of their households

Case study of survey from 17 villages from central and south-western Uganda.

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Water systems in rural Uganda

- 90% of the population in Uganda lives in rural areas (UBOS 2010). These rural areas have the highest levels of illiteracy, poor education facilities, poor health and inadequate infrastructure.
- Water plays a vital role in the wellbeing of rural households and reducing poverty especially through agriculture which is the main source of livelihoods.
- People in rural areas are most likely to use unimproved water sources, walk long distances to get it spending a lot of energy and time. Although access to safe water has improved over the last two decades, about 40% of the rural households still use unimproved water sources (GOU 2012).
- These unimproved water sources were ponds, open or hand-dug wells, and unprotected springs and majority of them are run under customary rights.

Pictures of unimproved water sources



Fig 1: Woman fetching water from a dirty pond



Fig 2: Man collecting water from an unsafe shallow well



Fig 3: Women and children collecting water from an unimproved well



Fig 4: Children fetching water from an unprotected spring

- Traditionally, women are responsible for collecting and management of water in the household. This responsibility also extends to operation and management of communal water resources.
- Many women and men remain vulnerable to lack of access to safe water even with the presence of community schemes and improved water sources due to natural and social changes. Social changes include inadequate operation and management (O&M) mechanisms, continuous breakdown of improved water sources and low involvement of women in water governance at local level (GOU 2009/10)
- These conditions mostly affect women and children who bare the burden of collecting the water and are sometimes forced to use unsafe water.



Fig 5: Child drinking dirty contaminated water fetched from an unimproved source.



Fig 6: Children and women fetching water from a dirty well.

Management of the rural community water systems.

- In Uganda, the Directorate of Water Development developed guidelines to facilitate the O&M of water sources and these included;
 - Formulation of Water User Committees (WUCs)
 - Emphasizing the participation of both men and women
 - Defining the roles and responsibilities played by each in the management of community water sources (GOU 2007)
- WUCs were established as primary structures to facilitate the O&M arrangements of water sources at community level. They are elected by the community and require at least 50% of participants to be women
- Functions of the WUCs are to mobilize community members who use the water resources to make contributions, participate in community meetings and to ensure proper maintenance of water sources. Community meetings are expected to occur on a regular basis to enable water users to discuss issues of operation and management.

- Two different studies were conducted to assess women's participation in community water management in over 17 districts in central and south western Uganda interviewing and interacting with over 800 rural women. The community water management of those villages was explored to understand how it influences the lives of women, control and authority of women and water management in a gender perspective.
- However, several gender inequities were manifested inherent in community water management processes and mechanisms which has hindered women's participation in community water management.

Access to safe water

- Securing safe water in rural Uganda is very difficult in most cases places women and children in potentially life threatening situations like risk of accidents due to the bad roads and bushes, drowning, rape and defilement etc.
- In 1990, new technologies like tube wells and boreholes were introduced to facilitate easy access of safe water alongside protected springs.
- At least every village had a shallow well or borehole. But few bore holes were functional at the time of the study.
- 26% of the respondents used shallow wells, 20% used boreholes (when they are functional), 9 % used rain harvested water and 5% used protected springs.
- However most women indicated that they preferred to use unimproved water sources because they are permanent, reliable and close to their households.
- Some women claimed that the water from improved sources was not tasty.

Some of the community managed improved water sources



Fig 5: Improved shallow well being constructed in Nakanyonyi village



Fig 6: An improved borehole being constructed by some men volunteers in one of the villages.



Fig 7: An improved protected spring that was being used in one of the villages.

- 88% of the women made their water safe by boiling. Due to use of unprotected water sources (even when water was boiled) 70% of the households experienced malaria incidences, 42% with stomach aches, 37% with diarrhea. Water-related diseases were associated with costs. 67% of the households indicated increase in household expenditure, 43% reporting an impact on school attendance and 38% recorded loss of earnings due to low labour.
- Access to safe water improves physical and mental health, reduces water related diseases and improves the productivity of households and their general livelihoods.

Role and participation of women in the management of community water sources in rural areas of Uganda.

- Maintenance of water resources is supposed to be a shared responsibility between men and women to ensure sense of ownership.
- Government has shown support for gender mainstreaming in the management of water resources by enacting laws and policies that include women in community water management e.g. the 1992 National Water Policy which states that women should make up 50% of the WUCs.
- Men were responsible for ensuring water availability for the community by digging wells and building pumps and women were responsible for ensuring water availability in the households.
- Formally constituted institutions like the LCs and WUCs mediate the access of water by the community. Some of these institutions are gender-sensitive, but most are not.
- WUCs also provide forum where the voices of the water users can be heard. Majority of whom are women.
- For all improved water sources, there were WUCs on village level.
- LC chairpersons, who are the most authoritative over the community water management, most of them are men due to patriarchal norms and stereotypes determine who accesses the water resources and some times certain individual are denied access depending on their relationship with them.
- Most WUCs and LCs are male dominated in terms of leadership positions.

- Out of 15 WUCs, only 3 had women in leadership positions (20%). Due to this, women voices are rarely given adequate attention due to power dynamics.
- Women presence on WUCs is more symbolic than functional. But, even with a large men presence in leadership positions, men play a minimal role in community water management creating heavier burden on the women.
- The women who maintained their positions on the WUCs gradually became inactive because their concerns were not taken seriously during decision making. Men on WUCs made decisions collaboratively with local leaders who are predominantly men.
- WUC meetings are mainly attended by women as the men are reluctant. Their absence negatively affects the outcomes. Even the few men who attend the meetings dominate the discussions.
- Despite commanding the discussions in meetings, men rarely acted on the issues relating to water source management.
- Women discuss and struggle with water issues on a regular basis but this hardly translates into practical solutions because they don't have the support of the men both physically and financially. But nevertheless, they continue to carry out work related to water collection and maintenance.



Fig 8: Water User Committee of Nakanyonyi village.



Fig 9: WUC of Kigulampya Village. The composition on women on WUCs is limited.

- For women, issues that were important for discussion were;
 - Maintenance of hand pumps
 - Children's behavior at water sources
 - Matters of leaderships and governance
- However, due to limited involvement of women in decision making related to water O&M, appropriate resolutions were hindered.
- Overtime, the responsibility for O&M of water sources has been increasingly taken up by women due to their cultural responsibility of providing water at home.
- However, women involvement in WUCs has shown to positively influence community water management. The WUC which had 3 women was reported to be the most active.
- WUC that had women in leadership roles enjoyed good relationship with LCs and had trust of Users for O&M. where WUCs weren't active, breakdowns persisted for 6 - 12 months.



Fig 8: A village WUC meeting in one of the villages.



Fig 9: Women attend WUC meetings more than the men.

- Limited access of knowledge and information which limits their involvement in community water management and access to water sources. About 81.6% of the women had no form or sensitization about community water management.
- Payments and contributions for maintenance limit access to safe water sources for most rural women. Only 20% of the households made such contributions. Men who are the household heads are reluctant to make those contributions. In turn, the children and women are denied access to the safe water sources. They then resort to using unimproved sources which exposes them to a number of risks. They also get reluctant to participate in the O&M activities to the community water sources.
- However, some vulnerable groups are exempted from paying and granted access to the water sources and are free to engage in O&M activities and programs.

Gender inequities in the management of rural community-managed water systems.

- Male dominated decision making process due to limited consultation and involvement of women and their inability to influence it's results which increases the burden to women and mismanagement of the water sources.
- Limited power relations for the women due to small number of women in leadership position. This is steered by patriarchal norms, stereotypes and cultural biases of men dominance which limits their participation and contribution towards O&M of the communal water sources.
- Limited engagement and action of men towards issues relating to management of water sources which results into increased burden to women for managing the water sources, travelling long distances to collect the water, using water from unimproved sources which exposes them to risks like drowning, accidents, water related disease etc.
- Some women were denied access to improved water systems due to failure of the men (household heads) to make their due financial contributions towards the operation and maintenance of the water sources. Although some women try to make some contribution, it's insufficient without the contribution of the men due to the limited or no incomes earned by the women. This further complicates their cultural role of maintaining water availability in the household.



Fig 10: Young girls maneuvering a dangerous path while fetching water.



Fig 11: Women have to juggle fetching water with other roles like looking after children



Fig 12: Women and children have to walk long distances to fetch water.

Conclusions and recommendations.

- Functionality of water sources depends heavily on cooperation between men and women in a community.
- Inaction of men pushes women to take up men's traditional responsibility of providing resources for maintaining water sources.
- Limited response of men towards operation and management of water sources largely stems from the patriarchal nature of society.
- Inadequate maintenance of water sources constraints women's access to the water sources which forces them to move long distances and use unimproved water sources.
- Limited engagement of men and support from WUCs has further created more obstacles to water access for women.
- Meaningful partnerships in community water management are important in ensuring proper operation and management to provide consistent availability of water within the community.
- Consistent engagement of women in meetings and WUCs shows their commitment to ensure availability of water at community level.
- Improved water service delivery can empower marginalized women and children leading to improved health, education, economic production, security as well as governance and sustainability of water sources.
- Training on O&M , particularly by the WUCs can improve mobilization of funds and quick repairs.

The end

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