



## Processes for Sustainability in Community-managed Water Systems

### WOMEN AND WATER MANAGEMENT

Project Partner: **World Vision**  
water

#### Main findings & recommendations

1. **Women are essential water committee members. They are often the first to recognize water system breakdowns, and they tend to have greater social capital, trust, and responsibility for water provision and use in the household.**

**Recommendation:** Emphasize in water committee training sessions why women should be meaningfully and actively involved in water management, including training on recognizing and addressing water system breakdowns and proper water system usage.

2. **In some study communities, women struggle to maintain active and meaningful involvement in water management when their voices are not heard because women attend meetings but do not participate or are not allowed to attend meetings.**

**Recommendation:** Encourage active participation of female committee and community members in water management decision-making. Women should be better represented in water committee executive positions (e.g. chairperson, treasurer, secretary). Holding these positions gives women greater decision making authority.

#### Background

The lack of sustainability of community-managed drinking water systems is a major concern in low- and middle-income countries. While water system breakdown is inevitable, some water systems continue to be rehabilitated and provide water for decades while others fail permanently shortly after implementation. Previous studies have shown that water committees and fee collection are critical to sustainability (Fisher 2015, Foster 2013). This study examined successful water systems to identify processes for sustainability.

#### Women are essential water committee members

##### Women have a greater connection to water

Women's closer relationship with water was frequently described by study participants. Women's role as the dominant water collectors and users is often given by community members, committee members and external support actors as a reason for the importance of their role in water management. Also, this greater knowledge of how water is used and more

direct reliance on a functioning water system compels to women being better managers of the water system. Female members of the water committee can also communicate better with women in the community about the water system. These female committee members bring other women's knowledge



Women collecting fees.

Courtesy of John Warren, World Vision. Written consent provided for the use and reproduction of this photo.

This brief describes findings on women and water management from qualitative research on processes for sustainability in community-managed water supplies involving interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Kenya, Zambia, and Ghana. Recommendations are intended for actors who provide support to community-managed water systems.

For more information, please visit the project website at <https://waterinstitute.unc.edu/processes-for-sustainability>

of the water system to the committee, and help lead and educate female community members.

## Female treasurers have a higher level of trust

Study participants perceived women as more trustworthy as treasurers and in other roles connected to money. A male water committee secretary in Zambia specifically pointed out that men may not be good managers of money, stating “We men, we are wasters [of] money.” Thus, female treasurers have the potential to improve project management. One World Vision staff member in Kenya stated, “You know with ladies [it] is very unlikely that they will mismanage the money and normally because of that the others tend to trust them, so the project runs better...”

## Recognizing and preventing breakdowns

Women, as the most frequent collectors of water, are more aware of the status of the water system and are more likely to detect hardware breakdowns. A few study participants indicated that women inform the committee when there is a hardware breakdown, thus triggering rehabilitation of the broken system. A water committee member in Ghana described that “the women are so important because before the borehole will spoil, they will detect it more than a man because a man, as for here, the men we don’t go to the borehole.” In terms of preventing breakdowns, women were more often present near the borehole and could actively take steps to curtail damage. A water committee member in Zambia stated that women tell “the children not to play with it and not pumping it too much, chasing the children because if they play with it, it can break down.”

## Barriers to women’s involvement in water management

While some committees may have equal or near equal gender representation in terms of positions on the committee, women on committees may not have an equal voice to that of the men, and women may not attend or speak at full community meetings focused on the water system as frequently as men. One male water committee secretary in Kenya noted, “It is not

## Acknowledgements

The Water Institute at UNC thanks team members from World Vision for their valuable guidance in this project. We also thank Julian Oliver and Leah Everist for their role in developing this study and conducting field work and Dr. Peggy Bentley and Dr. Valerie Flax for their guidance in the creation of study tools. Special thanks are due also to the study participants, interpreters and transcribers. This project was made possible with support from World Vision, the Wallace Genetic Foundation, the Morehead-Cain Foundation, the American Water Works Association (AWWA), the Jon Curtis Student Enrichment Fund, and the UNC Class of 1938 scholarship.



Water committee secretary in front of water kiosk, Kenya. Courtesy of Tori Klug. Written consent provided for the use and reproduction of this photo.

really easy to get some of them [female committee members] to go to the meetings because of the tasks that they have at home. It is not easy for some husbands to let them go to the meetings.” Even when women attend meetings, they may not speak or actively participate as much as men. A World Vision employee in Ghana illustrated this:

“When you go to the most of the communities, they gladly include women but the issue is that because of cultural barriers and you find out that sometimes, they come for meetings but they don’t speak up so much but is a gradual process ... [it] is about being comfortable and sometimes there are norms; it is not expected for a woman to speak before a stranger if the husband has not given her permission to do so.”

## Methods

We conducted qualitative and participatory field research in 18 rural communities in Kenya, Ghana, and Zambia through interviews, focus group discussions, community mapping, timeline activities, and structured observations. Additionally, we conducted interviews with World Vision stakeholders and post-construction support providers. In total, 321 recordings totalling 237 hours were collected between June and August 2015. Data were coded and analyzed thematically.