

Barriers for female decision-makers in Kenya's sanitation sector

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Quick read...

- Women working at sanitation-related public-sector institutions in Kenya reported challenges at work, which limited their professional aspirations, their voice and their influence on policies.
- Barriers exist at all stages of career development: girls face gender bias in school when pursuing technical degrees; young career-women must balance greater familial obligations than men; and mid-career women lack many of the networking opportunities that men have.
- Bullying and sexual harassment of women have not been adequately addressed thus far, leaving some women with little support and few alternatives.

Rationale

Gender inequity at the level of policy, regulation and management limits the voice and participation of women decision-makers and can perpetuate inequities throughout the sanitation sector. To address this, the Urban Sanitation Research Initiative aims to analyse gender inequity in educational and professional settings of sanitation-related organisations. This Research Brief is focused on Kenya.

Methods

We selected seven sanitation-related public-sector organisations, a multilateral organisation, two sanitation-related Kenyan NGOs, and a Kenyan NGO focused on gender issues to be part of our study. The public-sector organisations had mandates that spanned policy, financing, regulation, technical training and service provision in both urban and rural areas. We conducted a total of 40 in-depth interviews (19 men and 21 women), three gender-segregated focus group discussions (two with women and one with men), and 83 standardised surveys (39 women and 44 men). In this Research Brief, we present our observations from the field on barriers to gender-inclusive leadership in the sanitation sector.

Findings

STEM education: teaching gender bias to children

Of the 40 people we interviewed, 36 reported that there had been fewer women than men in the program where they earned their most advanced degree in engineering, law, finance, computer science or management. Some felt that gender disparity in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education arises from learned stereotypes regarding the kind of jobs women should do. For example, one interviewee observed that “*young girls wanting to be an engineer, they are told it's not good work for them.*” Even when not explicitly taught, girls learn by example; another interviewee noted that “*When you join uni [iversity], they expose you to the firms, and those firms from the water sector do not have many women so they [women/girls] think they won't get chances [to get a job at these firms].*”



Image: Community Development Officer at Nairobi City Water and Sanitation Company in Githogoro.
Credit: Brian Otieno.

Urban Sanitation Research Initiative Kenya

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We asked our interviewees whether they faced any challenges during their schooling due to their gender. Most of the women responded in the affirmative, with a minority reporting instances of discrimination and harassment from their peers as well as their professors. Three female interviewees reported that sexual harassment is rampant in colleges, with one female respondent reporting that *“a number of them started avoiding classes [because] the professor was constantly making sexual jokes.”* Lack of proper sanitation and hygiene facilities and lack of sensitivity towards MHM also force women to drop out of educational institutions. Four female and two male interviewees explicitly addressed the need for proper MHM facilities in schools.

The female body in the workplace

In our interviews, women acknowledged that their sanitary needs were generally met in the offices in which they worked; but a few observed that they were not met at some of the construction sites and at the wastewater treatment plants. While this limitation seemed to be relatively marginal, it was voiced by several women that they had more limited work assignment options due to a lack of sanitation access in these specific contexts, and that jobs which required permanent assignment to a construction site or at wastewater treatment plants were therefore always filled by men.

Both male and female interviewees acknowledged the extra burden placed on women during pregnancy, nursing and for childcare, and that it sometimes conflicted with work requirements. But there was a slight distinction in how it was described: women tended to describe it as a ‘choice’ or a ‘decision’ – often a difficult choice between work and family. One stated that *“there is a forced choice between work and childcare.”* Men, on the other hand, described more advanced jobs as *“requiring all hours”* and described women who recently had children as having *“performance issues.”* With newborns at home, women felt they were largely restricted from any travel, especially for the first year after birth. This limited women’s ability to take up field assignments, or participate in off-site trainings or conferences, during a time in their career when skill acquisition and networking are crucial. One male respondent acknowledged that *“...culturally it is ok for men to travel the whole month and just send money home, it is not so for women.”* Only two of our six public-sector institutions reported available lactation rooms. This was of particular frustration for several women that we interviewed.

The size and physiological structure of women is different than men. This difference is important when it comes to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Some equipment may lose some of its protectiveness when it is not sized properly, such as head gear and face masks. One of our female respondents complained that *“protective clothing (PPE) and equipment are designed for men. For example, equipment to unblock sewers and manholes are more manly or masculine. The overalls are also made for men and these cause limitations for women.”* This can disincentivise women from pursuing such positions.

Bullying and sexual harassment: unenforced policies and silent suffering

Sexual harassment can take many forms. It can manifest in the form of inappropriate humor. For example, one female respondent recalled how at a training, *“the trainer was talking about goods in terms of women’s body parts”* which made her feel uncomfortable, frustrated and embarrassed. It may also be in the form of requesting sexual favours: *“a lot of the men ... ask for sexual favours when women make any requests.”* Out of 21 women who participated in IDIs, seven of them had dealt with the threat of sexual harassment, and three reported experiencing direct sexual requests from superiors. Given the personal risk and feelings of shame involved in admitting having been the victim of such behaviors, it is safe to assume that the incidence rate, in reality, is much higher.

Another woman reported that such behavior can be a major setback, saying that *“yes, in terms of sexual harassment, maybe your boss is male, if you want something in your job description, they may make a demand. And you don’t want to anger your boss. So sometimes you just have to quit because of that.”* Other women agreed with this, saying that *“sexual harassment (is) so rampant in the sector ... these are likely to be the barriers for women’s growth in the sector.”* When women avoid training or quit their job it can have major consequences for their career.



Image: Collecting water in Kawaha-Soweto, Nairobi.

Out of the 22 men that participated either in an in-depth interview or a focus group, only three of them reported that sexual harassment continued to be a problem in the workplace. None of the men knew of any programs (such as sexual harassment trainings) or policies (such as human resources rules or procedures) meant to prevent or respond to instances of sexual harassment. From our employee survey, only 56% of women and 64% of men were aware of SH policy at their respective organization. One woman reported feeling that whatever effort that had been made, it was not sincere, since *“I can assure you that no (male) CEO has read that document... They (the CEOs) know that the SH policies exist, they check that box, but that’s it.”* Another said *“there is an issue of trust. They (the women) fear speaking out the truth.”* When one of our female respondents did go to HR about an instance of sexual harassment, the HR manager did not pursue the complaint.

The female voice in the workplace

Some of the male interviewees seemed to resist new ideas about gender equality. One man stated that *“women know their place: in the kitchen and taking care of children.”* Several men expressed an explicit negative prejudice towards women, including the ideas that male leaders are better, and women should not hold managerial posts because they are *“emotional”* and *“indecisive”*. One woman complained that the men *“...intimidate you, they don’t respect your personal space”* and *“male executives won’t follow up on complaints.”* Subordinates also expressed such views: *“a traditional man quit his job because his boss was a woman and he couldn’t follow her instructions.”*

Even at top leadership positions, women continued to face open discrimination: *“when men make recommendations on work matters, it is given a lot of weight, especially if they are older. It’s not the same for women, sometimes...you say things and no one pays attention or takes it seriously, you are gently dismissed.”* Many reported requests that they serve the other (male) board members, during meetings, for example requesting that the one woman in the room serve the men water or tea, even though she was also a board member: *“You have to be careful because you can’t let it pass...she told him “I am not here to serve water”, this led to a larger discussion about how ‘this woman’s rights’ are going too far.”* Being the only woman has an impact on a woman’s ability to voice her viewpoint: *“look at a meeting of 10 men and 1 woman, she is junior, she is intimidated. Do you think her ideas will see the light of day?”* One female respondent summed up her frustration regarding tokenism and a lack of genuine power sharing among genders: *“they are just ticking boxes, they are not really mainstreaming gender. They just hold workshops.”*

Social and professional networks

Men often meet for drinks after work, an activity that becomes an important venue for professional networking. Women are generally not able to network at all after the workday, in part due to familial obligations, but also because social expectations dictate that they avoid bars and drinking. One of our female respondents stated that *“if you want to remove a (female) CEO it is very easy because she doesn’t have time to build the network.”* Another reported that *“often, I choose to stay at home because... if I’m out after work for networking purposes, they will call me and ask where I am, and why I’m not at home – both my husband and my son will do this.”* Networking was not the only function of after-work meetings: corruption was also not usually done at the office during the day. But this too becomes an obstacle for career-minded women, one respondent explained that *“...governance affects women. Because how are these (corrupt) people appointed? There’s no competition, so women can’t compete.”*



Image: Talking to residents in Githima, Nakuru.
Credit: Brian Otieno.

Respondents' recommendations

The survey respondents identified institutional policies that could be restructured or modified to improve gender representation. Transparent channels on promotion and salary structures and enforced government mandates on gender representation were identified by 49% and 36% of women as important policies (see Table 1). Our interviewees were of the view that to ensure that women thrive in the sector, there should be support networks and services. This included developmental and leadership training. Another suggestion that was repeated by a few of our female interviewees was the creation of a professional network of women so they can guide, help and mentor other women professionals in the sector. Many female interviewees suggested that offering flexi-time would enhance gender representation in the sector (see Table 1). Providing safe and comfortable facilities for lactation rooms was also suggested.

Table 1. Survey results on addressing gender equality.

<i>"How can we address gender equality and an equal distribution of genders among workers in the water and sanitation sector?"</i>	Female (n=39) %	Male (n=44) %
Better work / life balance	31	23
Government mandate	36	18
Development and leadership training of women	48	23
Role models	36	16
Educate managers and staff of the benefits of gender equality among managers	59	25
Offer and support flexible work	46	16
Transparent salary structure	49	16

Conclusions and recommendations

This study has collected the narratives of women and men in the sanitation sector and found that women face a wide range of challenges which can be expected to have a material impact on their prospects in the workplace. It is crucial for the sanitation sector to meet the basic needs of their female staff, such as:

1. Full access to MHM-friendly latrines at all sites, including waste treatment plants and field sites.
2. Maternity and paternity leave, flexible scheduling and lactation rooms for new mothers
3. For young mothers and fathers, create nearby or on-site alternatives to workshops and conferences that require travel. When travel is unavoidable, make arrangements for young mothers to return quickly in an emergency.
4. Provide PPE that are designed for women, for all jobs that require protective gear.
5. Create a culture that is intolerant to sexual jokes in professional settings. Create confidential systems that protect victims of sexual harassment, and discourage sexual predators.
6. Create professional groups, systems and events which allow women to network, mentor and support each other, during hours and in locations that are friendly to women.
7. Educate managers and staff of the benefits of both gender equity among staff, and equal representation of women and men among management.
8. Make salary structures and promotion policies transparent and ensure that all employees are considered equally.

While these recommendations may not end gender inequity in the workplace for the sanitation sector of Kenya, according to the women that we interviewed, these policies would mark a large step in the right direction.

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