Addressing two critical MDGs together: gender in water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives

Juliet Willetts, Gabrielle Halcrow, Naomi Carrard, Claire Rowland and Joanne Crawford

Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology, Sydney
International Women’s Development Agency, Melbourne

Increasing access to water, sanitation and hygiene education and advancing gender equality are critical issues for Pacific island nations. This article proposes that water, sanitation and hygiene issues and gender equality can be constructively addressed together, with the former three providing an entry point for the latter. Empirical results are presented from strengths-based research conducted in Vanuatu and Fiji, investigating gender outcomes arising from water, sanitation and hygiene interventions. A range of positive outcomes are identified. These include some expected outcomes—for example, a reduction in women’s labour associated with collecting water—as well as several unexpected strategic gender outcomes, including women taking on leadership roles and men assuming greater responsibility for hygiene in the home. Another important finding in one community was a reduction in household violence against women caused by conflict over water management. The research articulates positive gender outcomes associated with water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives and demonstrates that these can be achieved by implementing relatively simple, cost-effective and known strategies for integrating gender considerations into water, sanitation and hygiene programming.

The need for increased attention to water, sanitation and hygiene in the Pacific

The need for increased attention to water, sanitation and hygiene in the Pacific is clear (Willetts, Wicken and Robinson 2009). In 2006, according to data from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) relating to Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets to halve the number of people without access to safe water and basic sanitation, only 48 per cent of the population in the Pacific had access to improved sanitation\(^1\) and only 46 per
Gender inequality is widely accepted as integral to sustainable development, aid effectiveness and achieving the MDGs and is an overarching principle of many multilateral and bilateral donor aid programs. Gender inequality is pervasive in the Pacific region. While all Pacific island countries have endorsed the Pacific Platform for Action, which calls for Pacific-wide adoption of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), three countries have yet to ratify and elsewhere more needs to be done to implement commitments nationally. Women’s representation in Pacific parliaments is the lowest in the world, and women’s lack of representation and voice combined with the high incidence of gender-based violence undermine women’s participation in political, social and economic life. Women’s access to and control over economic resources, education and training opportunities are severely curtailed by gender stereotyping and discrimination. Restrictive gender roles are reinforced and perpetuated by discriminatory laws, including in relation to family, marriage, divorce and access to land (PIF 2009). In some countries, female enrolment levels continue to show a general decline after the first few years of primary school, and adequate access by women to general and reproductive health care remains an issue in several Pacific island countries.

Recent research findings (Fairbairn-Dunlop, Mason, Reid and Waring 2009:57, 64) indicate that tracking changes in gender relations at a community level is often hampered by the lack of baseline data. These findings also point to the difficulties faced by field staff in implementing ‘gender’ concepts in their programmatic work and in engaging women in genuine dialogue about the gendered impacts of projects. Overall, intentions to integrate gender into program activities are often hampered by the lack of appropriate approaches, particularly for non-gender experts, including lack of knowledge of viable entry points.
Links between water, sanitation and hygiene and gender equality

The almost-universal gap between commitment to gender equality and implementation through gender mainstreaming is amplified in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector. The sector has historically focused on the provision of infrastructure and technical expertise in planning, implementation and management and has mostly viewed gender narrowly and instrumentally in terms of efficiency and the participation required for effectiveness, rather than as a broader matter of rights and empowerment. As Ivens (2008) notes, however, ‘women’s participation in water programmes will not allow for women’s empowerment unless power imbalances between women and men are addressed’. If current water, sanitation and hygiene investments are to result in approaches to water, sanitation and hygiene planning and management that meet the needs of women and men, maximise development impact and advance practical and strategic gender needs, bridging the gap between policy and practice on gender is essential.

Gender equality is an important consideration in, and a potential outcome from, enhancing access to safe water and improved sanitation and hygiene. Women and girls play key roles in the provision, management and safeguarding of water in their communities. For instance, according to WHO/UNICEF (2008), in 75 per cent of cases in developing countries, it is women who collect and carry water. Their exclusion from community decision-making and other aspects of water, sanitation and hygiene denies them their rights and results in various unwanted outcomes including inappropriate system design, potentially negative social and economic impacts and perpetuation of existing gender inequalities.

In addition, research indicates that the sustainability of investments (in terms of functionality and use of infrastructure after a project) is enhanced when women are closely involved (Gross, van Wijk and Mukherjee 2000). Equally, men’s exclusion from sanitation activities often results in limited behavioural change if approaches to improving health do not reflect differences in men’s and women’s health and hygiene behaviour and workloads.

In the Pacific, there are a number of initiatives in play to improve access to water, sanitation and hygiene but little direct attention to how water, sanitation and hygiene and gender issues interrelate. Various strategic-level regional frameworks and plans have been agreed (for example, the Pacific Wastewater Policy and Pacific Framework for Action 2001, the Pacific Regional Action Plan 2002 and the Strategic Framework for Action on Drinking Water Quality and Health 2005). These guide the continuing efforts of governments and institutions tasked with water, sanitation and hygiene promotion and management, international agencies active in the sector (WHO, UNICEF) and regional and non-governmental organisations (for example, the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission, Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International) in raising the priority of water, sanitation and hygiene and building the required human resource base. Gender is barely mentioned in the above frameworks and actions and features in only a few organisations’ approaches. This lack of attention to gender represents a missed opportunity to improve the quality and sustainability of water, sanitation and hygiene interventions and to address gender inequalities.
Lack of guidance for Pacific water, sanitation and hygiene practitioners on gender

The research discussed in this article arose from a lack of Pacific-focused research exploring the gender–water, sanitation and hygiene nexus and a strong need to demystify gender concepts and materials to assist non-expert non-governmental organisation workers and other institutions to integrate gender into water, sanitation and hygiene interventions in a Pacific context. AusAID (2005) guidelines for gender integration in water and sanitation programs promote gender analysis, gender strategy development, raising awareness of gender issues and the need for external gender expertise to achieve these goals. These and other guidelines in the sector are often focused on a theoretical level and emphasise practical gender needs and efficient development outcomes, rather than advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment as core outcomes of water, sanitation and hygiene programs, as envisioned in AusAID’s (2007) current gender policy framework. An initiative undertaken through the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC), ‘Tapping Connections’ (Crennan 2004), funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), provides a broad, Pacific-tailored approach to raising critical questions about gender and equity issues arising in water and sanitation initiatives and the intimate connections between people and water. This research builds from this and looks to document and provide detailed examples of the potential for positive gender outcomes resulting from inclusive approaches to community engagement in water, sanitation and hygiene projects.

Research design

The research described in this article was undertaken by the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) and the International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA), in collaboration with World Vision Vanuatu and Live and Learn Environmental Education Fiji (Live and Learn) in two case study countries in the Pacific: Vanuatu and Fiji.

The research engaged with current (or recent) non-governmental organisation-implemented programs that specifically incorporated a gendered participatory approach of some kind: World Vision Vanuatu’s water, sanitation and hygiene projects that utilised the Participatory Hygiene and Sanitation Transformation (PHAST) methodology (Simpson-Herbert, Sawyer and Clarke 1997) in rural Vanuatu; and Live and Learn’s learning circles and water governance project in Fiji. PHAST is an empowering participatory development approach in increasing use in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. It was developed by the WHO and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and informed by UNDP’s PROWESS (promotion of the role of women in water and sanitation) work in the 1990s, which aimed to identify strategies and tools for expanding women’s role in water, sanitation and hygiene projects. Learning circles are an inclusive, deliberative, group-based approach to dialogue and decision-making, focused in this instance on water governance. Live and Learn used the methodology in the case study communities, included separate discussions with men, women and youth and specifically addressed the involvement of women in decision making.

The research, which will eventually result in tailored guidance for water, sanitation and hygiene practitioners in the Pacific, addresses four key questions.
1. What does strengths-based research reveal about the breadth and depth of gender outcomes from water and sanitation initiatives in the Pacific? What are the strengths of different water, sanitation and hygiene approaches in achieving gender outcomes?

2. What are the implications for strategic integration of gender into water and sanitation initiatives in the Pacific and elsewhere?

3. What are the implications for meaningful measurement of aid effectiveness in terms of gender outcomes?

4. What are the implications of the research for current gender equality theories and approaches?

This article addresses the first question, describing empirical findings from research undertaken with communities in Fiji and Vanuatu.

Methodological approach

The research used a strengths-based approach informed by principles of empowerment, appreciation and participation, reflecting the intention to build on existing strengths and enable a learning process for all involved. The participant organisations intended this to lead to a stronger focus on gender and increased capability to integrate gender into water, sanitation and hygiene activities. For participating communities, the process provided opportunities for constructive conversation about gender issues.

The following principles and ways of thinking influenced the research approach and the choice of methods.

- **Context is critical and should shape conceptions of gender equality and equity.** While the research team had pre-existing perspectives about the relationship between gender and water, sanitation and hygiene, enabling research participants to help define the frame of investigation was strongly valued. The team sought to avoid assuming conceptions of gender equality, instead generating dialogue about women’s and men’s roles, relationships and specific experiences in order to frame their meaning to non-governmental organisation staff and the research communities. In communities, the team referred to women’s and men’s roles and relationships and avoided the term ‘gender’.

- **Focus on strengths and appreciation.** The research process sought to empower non-governmental organisation staff and community participants to address gender equality. It is grounded in the philosophy and process of ‘appreciative inquiry’ (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999) and the underpinning belief that people move in the direction in which they focus; so if we focus on the positive, we direct ourselves and our lives towards the positive. The approach sought to expose and build on the existing strengths of non-governmental organisation staff and community participants, to promote learning and action as a result of the inquiry process and to maintain a constructive focus in the dialogues that took place.

- **Trans-disciplinarity and a commitment to research that contributes to resolving societal issues.** Trans-disciplinary research is characterised by an explicit aim to contribute to resolving a societal issue or problem (Wickson, Carew and Russel 2006). Such research supports an evolving methodology, allowing it to be shaped by the context, partners and participants. The researchers actively engage with these stakeholders as part of a mutual learning process.
Mixed-method design. The research included qualitative and quantitative components, reflecting a pluralistic epistemological base and valuing each element for a different purpose. The qualitative component was based on an inductive, interpretative approach seeking conceptions from the perspective of research participants. The quantitative component involved translating emerging concepts into scales and categories such that empirical evidence within a given community could be assessed through participatory quantification (Mayoux and Chambers 2005).

Research methods

The research team comprised four staff members from ISF and IWDA and six team members (female and male) from the relevant non-governmental organisation. Non-governmental organisation staff facilitated the process with communities. Two rural communities participated in Vanuatu and two in Fiji, with participants generally in the range of 15–25 women and a similar number of men (though a smaller number of men participated in one of the Fijian communities). Community names have been changed to protect anonymity.

The non-governmental organisation projects that had been conducted in the community were briefly discussed to position the research as investigating outcomes associated with those projects before proceeding with the main research activities. The first four activities were conducted in separate groups of women and men.

1. Paired (or small group) interviews. Sharing stories in answer to an open-ended question about positive experiences that had resulted from the water, sanitation and hygiene projects and identifying the factors that made these positive experiences possible.

2. Larger groups report back and synthesis. Group discussion, drawing a tree with fruits as gender outcomes and roots as causes or enabling factors, using a method proposed by Mayoux (2003). The fruits were identified as the positive outcomes for men and women related to the stories that had been told in step one above.

3. Ranking exercise. Group discussion to identify which outcomes were most important and why, with the discussion and final ranking documented.

4. Group visions. Visions of the future were shared, identifying even better outcomes associated with water, sanitation and hygiene for women and men in terms of roles played and relationships. In some communities, role-plays were developed and subsequently performed (to men and women).

5. Whole-group (men and women) presentation and discussion. Sharing women’s and men’s group contributions, with non-governmental organisation facilitators encouraging discussion about significant issues arising and particularly any points of difference between each group’s perceptions.

6. Collaborative analysis by the research team. The research team analysed data collected during community activities and discussions. Each member of the research team was asked to identify three outcomes they saw as being valued, presenting evidence from activities and discussions and identifying where there were similarities and differences in views within and between the groups.

7. Quantification activity. A participatory quantification activity using pocket
voting was designed to reveal how widespread the personal experience of certain gender outcomes was among women and men. Two sets of questions were developed—one for women and one for men—with many questions common to both groups. A final dialogue to reflect on the results of this activity was held, particularly pointing out where women’s and men’s perceptions about the same issue differed.

Findings

Major empirical findings from the case study communities are presented in terms of the positive gender outcomes identified and valued by women and men. The findings are summarised (Table 1) and then discussed in more detail utilising quotes and illustrations from the quantitative evidence. Later, these findings will be compared and contextualised with reference to relevant gender and water, sanitation and hygiene literature.

The gender outcomes represent changes with regard to women’s practical gender needs and strategic gender interests. Practical gender needs are the concrete needs women and men have for survival and economic advancement, which do not in themselves challenge the existing sexual division of labour, legal inequalities or other aspects of discrimination due to cultural and social practices (AusAID 2007). Water, sanitation and hygiene programs commonly focus and report on meeting women’s practical gender needs such as access to safe water and sanitation facilities. Strategic gender interests refer to the status of women in relation to men. Progress towards strategic gender needs supports women to achieve greater equality and enable change in existing roles, thereby challenging women’s subordinate position (Moser 1993). Advancing women’s strategic gender interests involves addressing structural and cultural barriers to women’s equal participation in all aspects of life. Changes that address underlying causes as well as the consequences of inequality can help to bring about fundamental changes in gender relations. The findings presented below show that in both case study communities, incremental progress relating to various strategic gender interests had been achieved.

Empirical findings in Vanuatu

Positive changes in gender relations at the family or household level. Improvements in the dynamics at the family or household level were found as a result of the project activities in both communities and consisted of several elements. This outcome included increased respect and support given to women by men due to an increased sense of pride in their clean families and homes. It also included changes in the gendered division of labour, with men increasingly sharing household responsibilities such as cooking and playing a greater role in hygiene. Such changes represent increased power for women and the ability to negotiate with their husbands.

The rehabilitation of the gravity-feed system in one community was associated with a major improvement in relationships between wives and husbands, as improved access to water resolved disputes that arose when women requested assistance from their husbands to fetch water. Often their requests were refused and at times men responded to these requests with violence against their wives. This quote illustrates this point:

When the water was not here every time I went to the garden and I came back I had to get firewood and help in the kitchen and feed the animals. Then
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of gender outcome</th>
<th>Findings evident in Vanuatu</th>
<th>Findings evident in Fiji</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive changes in gender relations at the family or household level</td>
<td>Increased respect given to women by husbands and other men in the household</td>
<td>Women are more respected by men and feel more valued</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Men taking on an increasing role in hygiene in their home to support their wives</td>
<td>Communication between husbands and wives has improved</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reduction in violence at the household level</td>
<td>Men are participating more in household sanitation and water management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive changes in gender relations at the community level</td>
<td>Recognition of women’s hard work in the community</td>
<td>There is an increased sense of community unity, through men and women working together</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increased trust in and respect for women</td>
<td>Women’s efforts to promote community sanitation and health are recognised by men</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Women are more respected by men and feel more valued</td>
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<td>Women included in decision-making processes in their community</td>
<td>Women taking on leadership roles for the first time in their community, resulting in individual empowerment</td>
<td>Women have an increased voice at the community level</td>
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<td>Women’s inclusion in committees and decision-making processes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increased space and support for women’s voices to be heard at the community level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women’s labour in collecting water reduced and their practical need for water, hygiene and sanitation facilities satisfied</td>
<td>Major and strongly valued outcome by women particularly, and also by men</td>
<td>Not applicable in Fijian case study communities, as the relevant non-governmental organisation project did not provide infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s solidarity increased</td>
<td>Not applicable as not reported</td>
<td>Women are working together and supporting each other</td>
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my wife used to tell me to get some water. I would say it’s too much work and I would get angry, we would fight and I would hit her [killim]. We used to reuse the water 2–3 times. The kids used to be at the clinic all the time. Since the water has come the kids are healthy, there’s less work, I can spend more time in the garden and there’s no more fighting with my wife (Puluan male leader).

Women in this community reported that the improved relations with their husbands also now meant a better relationship in which they could make requests of their husband and their husband would comply.

**Positive changes in gender relations at the community level.** Men’s attitudes towards women had improved in both communities involved in the research. Women’s labour and contribution at the community level through the water and sanitation projects and in other community works were strongly recognised and valued by men. Men saw women as trustworthy in contributing to community events and labour and both women and men noted that women were the first to respond to calls for community meetings and work.

*Thru long ol mama community I laef long olgeta* [Community is alive because of women—women give life]. They are participating and are contributing very well in all of the training, community work, fundraising (Puluan man).

Based on this recognition and the value placed on women’s contributions, men had increased respect for women, which in turn led to valuing their voice in decision making, as discussed further below.

Now we have recognised the women’s labour and we respect them. We have to give respect. We’ve recognised our mistake (Puluan man).

**Women’s inclusion in decision-making processes in their community.** There was some increase in the involvement of women in positions of responsibility and in decision making more broadly in both communities. The non-governmental organisation’s project approach, with its participatory planning processes (explicitly involving women and men) and attention to gender balance in water and sanitation committees, had created some important ‘firsts’ in increasing women’s voice in decisions.

Previously during the meetings the men would tell us we are women so we can’t talk and we remain silent, but now we are talking since World Vision (Nanen woman).

We used to be scattered and not working together [between the women], now we have representation on the committee. Before women didn’t talk in community meetings, now they participate and also take decisions. It makes me so proud that we have a voice in development compared to previous years where only men talked. This is through encouragement from World Vision. (Puluan woman)

Women reported that they had taken on leadership roles for the first time within their community, a positive outcome in terms of their self-confidence and empowerment and led to increased respect for women more generally.

I was the treasurer last year for the community [water] committee. The men had chosen me and voted for me. I was very proud as I was the first and only woman to be on the committee. I was faithful in attending the workshops, the community trusted me. It made me feel proud to be a woman. I was the first lady to have a position of responsibility (Nanen female committee member).
In Nanen, 92 per cent of men considered it important or very important for women to be on the committee, with only one respondent not considering it important, while 89 per cent of women thought it important or very important. In Puluan, all respondents considered it important that women be on the water and sanitation committee. Support for the inclusion of women stemmed from the previous outcome in terms of men’s recognition of women’s contribution to community and increased trust in women. Reflecting this, men supported making space for women’s voices in community decision-making and also recognised that lack of self-confidence at times made the women hold back.

In meetings, women have many important ideas in their minds and heart. They just don’t have the confidence to talk in front of everyone. You can see them shaking, their mouths are shaking. They have lots of good things in their heart; they just need to speak it out (Puluan man).

*Heart blong you en strait. Gudfela in your heart emi stap there, need confidence and courage to speak it out [You have a good/true heart. The goodness in your heart stays there inside, need confidence and courage to speak it out]* (Puluan man).

**Women’s labour in collecting water reduced and their practical need for water, hygiene and sanitation facilities satisfied.** This positive outcome is the one mentioned most commonly in reports on gender effects of water, sanitation and hygiene programs. It includes the reduction in physical labour associated with collecting and carrying water to homes as well as satisfying the need for water, sanitation and hygiene in their daily roles as the main caregivers in their families.

Before there was so much difficulty to fetch water so I used to shut my baby in the sleeping house so I could take the clothes down to wash and carry back the water. It used to be such hard and heavy work. When I came back the baby would be crying. Now there is less walking and work to get water. I have more time at home to care properly for my children. I’m now teaching good hygiene practices and I am a good mother. Before, I used to go to the hospital with my children all the time. But now they are healthy (Nanen woman, crying as she told this story) (Senitoa woman).

**Empirical findings from Fiji**

**Positive changes in gender relations at the family or household level.** Communication between husbands and wives had improved in both communities in Fiji. Many referred to this change as greater ‘love and listening’ in the household. It also extended, however, to the way in which issues were resolved at the household level, how roles and tasks were negotiated and shared, how household decisions were made and the visibility and valuing of women’s work and women. As one woman in Senikau Village explained:

*The head of the household [usually men] were able to recognise the benefits of the women’s initiatives in, for example, cleaning the toilets. The men were able to also see the benefit of maintaining better waste management practices. Men also appreciated the amount of work women do, particularly in the upkeep of the household.*

In many cases, there was a shift in traditional roles evident in the household, with an increase in men’s participation in household-level sanitation activities. In one community, Senitoa, this change was marked, with 15 of 19 women noting there
had been a ‘big’ or ‘very big’ change in this area, and none indicating there had been no change. In the other community, Senikau, the majority of women noted only a ‘small change’. A young man in Senitoa expressed how his views had changed.

The project has opened my eyes. I have changed how I manage the family, for example, how I manage health. As chief of the family, I encourage the family to go to church and to go to school and achieve more things. Now I play more and different roles, for example, weeding grass in front of the house, helping to manage waste, and supporting my wife.

Positive changes in gender relations at the community level. There was a perceived increased sense of community unity in both the case study communities. The community considered the project to have led to increased levels of cooperation and collaboration between women and men. While community participants referred to this notion as ‘working together’, it should be noted that this usually meant that groups of women and groups of men worked towards a common community goal on specific and different tasks and in roles that were complementary to one another. What is perhaps more significant in terms of gender outcomes is that women’s efforts to promote community sanitation and health are strongly recognised by the men. Men reported that women put into action the skills and activities suggested in non-governmental organisation training sessions. Women took the lead and gained recognition for their efforts by men in the community, and in some cases inspired men to participate.

Men acknowledge the amount of work the women have done and their role. Men always talk. Women always do the work and are more committed to get things done. They take more responsibility. The change is the recognition and that they [men] see they need to share the labour and recognise the work and contribution. (Senikau man)

This acknowledgment and recognition was linked with increased trust in, and respect for, women by men

The response to women has changed, they are more listened to; there is more trust of women. Whatever project women take a lead in, it is a success. For example, in health issues, drainage, compost. Women have gained respect (Senikau woman).

Women’s inclusion in decision-making processes in their community. Live and Learn had introduced more deliberative approaches to decision making with various views, including those of women, being discussed. This shift started to make space for women to participate and be heard

Men are able to listen to the women more compared to [the] past. The norm is in a village meeting the men or leaders would speak and tell people what to do; it was one-way communication and decision making. The learning circles helped us to listen together and we started to value the discussion and sharing of ideas before arriving at a decision (Senikau man).

In the past they [women] weren’t able to speak in meetings. But then men started noticing that women were very punctual to meetings and regularly attended. So the men decided to give women a larger role in the meetings. Men could also see that women were really hard workers and so felt they had something to contribute to decision-making (Senitoa man).
Overall, there was evidence of an increased voice for women, although to varying extents between and within the two communities. In Senikau, the majority of women said that they thought there had been no change in how much they were listened to at the community level. In contrast in Senitoa, 85 per cent of women thought there was a ‘big’ or ‘very big’ change in women’s opportunity to speak at meetings. While men noted some change in how much women were listened to and the extent to which their views influenced decisions, only 7 per cent noted a very big change in this area.

An increased voice for women was generally seen as positive within the cultural context that women’s participation supported rather than challenged traditional leadership by men. When asked whether participation of women in decision-making was positive or whether it disturbed traditional leadership, the Senikau Village headman responded:

We like the roles women play and we acknowledge them. It doesn’t disturb the traditional leadership as it’s our responsibility as men to listen to our women. For us not to would be unfair. We see that things are changing slowly, in the past we didn’t listen so much. We see it as positive and appreciate it. We see that things are changing and that the women put their views forward and it is not done in a challenging way, it’s seen as supportive and an improvement.

**Women’s solidarity increased.** Through the project activities, women worked together and supported one another more than in the past, resulting in concerted action and in improved relationships between women. There was a sense that by working collectively and by uniting their voices, women were able to improve their situation. In Senitoa, this was the most highly valued gender outcome associated with the Live and Learn project. As one woman said:

Women are working together and are very supportive of each other. The learning circles encourage participation and sharing. After the training we started sitting together and discussed what we could do together as a women’s group. If someone learns something new we gather and share. Our husbands are really liking the work we do. It’s also influenced other women who didn’t attend the training to join in. We have pride in the work we have done, we feel proud of what we have done.

**Elements of practitioner work that led to these gender outcomes**

Positive gender outcomes identified in case study communities can in large part be attributed to the sound community engagement and development approaches used by the participating non-governmental organisations. In Vanuatu, enabling factors associated with World Vision’s approach include the use of PHAST as a methodology, with its emphasis on accessible learning and empowering participation and the space it provides for women alongside men in communities to determine and plan for water, sanitation and hygiene facilities that will best meet their needs. World Vision Vanuatu’s overall development approach was also identified as enabling positive gender outcomes, particularly organisational values expressed as ‘child focused and women focused’. Explicit efforts were made by the local project team to undertake planning and other project activities at times and in locations...
that facilitated women’s participation in the activities and in decision-making, in advocating for women’s representation on development committees and in the training of male hygiene promoters.

In Fiji, Live and Learn uses water as an entry point to talk about governance, leadership and inclusion. Its learning-circles approach has a strong emphasis on inclusion and is developed on the basis of research conducted at the outset of the project on attitudes and perceptions of communities relating to water governance. Live and Learn’s training was offered to all community members and emphasised inclusivity. Women reported that because the men had also attended training and knew what the activities were, this legitimised the women taking on roles that were slightly outside the norm. In addition, Live and Learn introduced new approaches to decision-making that included discussion and debate between community members before decision-making. This differed dramatically from existing more top-down approaches that involved limited community consultation. Live and Learn’s approach played an important role in allowing women’s voices to be included and heard. Finally, Live and Learn’s emphasis on long-term relationships with recipient communities, trialling and testing of different approaches and regular follow-up and encouragement all contributed to the gender outcomes observed.

In Fiji and Vanuatu, the quality, commitment and attitude of non-governmental organisation staff members were core to achieving positive gender outcomes. In both cases, staff members were locally recruited women and men, all of whom were well versed in the culture, language and dynamics of the communities and had established good relationships with each community.

Future stages of the research and anticipated outcomes

The research discussed in this article will be further refined, analysed and contextualised in gender and water, sanitation and hygiene literature and developed into guidance material to support implementing agencies working in the Pacific. This will begin closing the knowledge gap by exploring the strategies, steps and activities that are effective in advancing gender equality in and through water, sanitation and hygiene programs, the enabling factors (particularly contextual and cultural), how learning can be applied to other situations and how such successes can be measured. Research outcomes will also support donors and governments in understanding the practical implications of existing guidelines, adjust these if required, appropriately resource the integration of gender in an expanded water, sanitation and hygiene program and more effectively assess achievements against the MDGs.

Conclusion

This article presents the need for water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives in the Pacific—particularly for gender-sensitive water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives—outlines why and how this might be done and provides empirical evidence of what the potential gender outcomes might look like. The various gender outcomes observed across case study communities represent a spectrum, ranging from those addressing women’s practical needs (such as access to water that reduces labour) to strategic gender interests (for instance, women taking on leadership roles and participating in community decision-making for the first time). Notably, outcomes in one community included a reduction in violent household disputes over water management, and across
all communities significant changes in men’s perspectives about women were observed. The research methodology proved successful in allowing gender conceptions to be shaped by the community participants themselves. It also supported constructive reflection and learning for community participants and for non-governmental organisation staff. In general, many outcomes documented (such as women’s inclusion in decision-making) represent only the first steps towards empowering women and shifting men’s attitude—both of which are essential for achieving gender equality. There were, however, promising signs that changes would continue to take place, building on achievements so far, and that the dialogue that took place as part of the research would open new possibilities for future change in case study communities. Gender changes observed can be attributed to sound community engagement and empowering participatory approaches used by the participating non-governmental organisations, as well as to the innate qualities and strengths of the women and men in participating communities.

Notes

1 According to WHO/UNICEF, improved sanitation means a composting toilet, pit latrine with slab, ventilated pit latrine or flush or pour-flush toilet with appropriate disposal facilities.

2 According to WHO/UNICEF, improved water supply means piped water, public tap, tube-well, protected dug well, protected spring and rainwater collection.

References


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