

USAID/E3 Water Communications and Knowledge Management (CKM) Project

GLOBAL WATERS RADIO

Sylvia Cabus on Gender Mainstreaming in Water and Sanitation Programming

Interview Transcript

Global Waters Radio: You are tuned in to Global Waters Radio, a podcast series produced by the Water Team at the U.S. Agency for International Development. The series offers listeners insights from USAID officials, development partners, thought leaders, and experts from across the water sector, as they discuss current USAID water programming and cutting-edge research from around the world.

This week on the podcast, Sylvia Cabus, Senior Gender Advisor for USAID's Office of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Sylvia's going to be talking about some of the many ways the Agency integrates gender into its water, sanitation, and hygiene programming. The strong connections between WASH improvements and girls and women's empowerment received prominent mention in the U.S. Government's first-ever Global Water Strategy, released last year, which notes as part of its first Strategic Objective that "access to sanitation for women and girls is particularly crucial to preserving basic dignity, improving access to education and economic opportunities, and reducing gender-based violence."

To kick things off, Sylvia can you talk about the prominent role that gender plays in the Global Water Strategy?

Sylvia Cabus: It was a great experience to be part of that drafting team, and as you mentioned gender is a very strong component of the Strategy. And it is actually not a new component. The Global Water Strategy builds upon the previous Agency strategy as well as the legislation that the Water Office at USAID works under—the Water for the World Act—both of which are explicit in their direction to promote women and girls and improved access to WASH services. So we have a whole suite of policies that are related to gender that all underscore the importance of gender equality in our programming. So the Global Water Strategy did not emerge out of isolation; it builds upon these other strategies and also builds upon the Agency's experience. So what we see in the Global Water Strategy is not new, but it is definitely a lot stronger and a lot more explicit.

GWR: There is a growing body of evidence revealing strong connections between improved water access and women’s economic empowerment. Can you talk about some of the ways water and sanitation improvements help create new livelihood opportunities for women as entrepreneurs, or as leaders in the WASH sector?

SC: Traditionally, improved access to WASH services has meant a lighter work load and more time for women and girls. So we have seen with that time savings, women and girls have more opportunity to participate in public life, whether it is directly related to water—such as serving on a water users committee—or engaging in political life, or in income-generating activities. And of course water use at the community level is very complex. We know that individual water points are not just for drinking water, they are also for agriculture and livestock and other household uses. So our challenge now is how to do we capitalize on the availability of time, and also how do we scale-up some of those economic activities that water is such a big part of. And then usually we talk about water as a productive resource in relation to agriculture, whether it is using the local water point for kitchen gardens, for household consumption and for sales on the local market, or on a greater scale, such as irrigation systems. At all of those different levels, women’s participation is really important because we know women and men play different roles in agriculture.

So how do we move from that to more innovative and creative entrepreneurship? We’ve seen, for example, that in India we have women staffing water kiosks. How do we promote that kind of water entrepreneurship? We see in Malawi that mothers’ groups have on their own started producing reusable sanitary napkins. That’s clearly a WASH-related issue; how do we professionalize and scale that up? You know, there’s a whole lot of different possibilities, so it’s a very exciting time to work in the sector, but it also means that we need to be careful about using our resources and making sure that the community—and women and girls especially—have the voice in articulating how they would like to participate in the water sector as entrepreneurs, or as users, or advocates.

GWR: Staying on the topic of girls for a moment, can you talk a bit more about how access to improved water, sanitation, and hygiene contributes to better outcomes for girls in school?

SC: We have a very strong evidence base that shows the linkages between improved WASH access at schools and girls’ enrollment and retention at school. And that is primarily because of improved menstrual hygiene management (MHM) practices. So not only the structural construction package of having a girl-friendly latrine, but also access to products—sanitary napkins are usually the preferred product. And also MHM education for both boys and girls.

And that actually brings up another emerging issue for gender equality in the water sector is, how do we engage men and boys in WASH issues when we have traditionally seen women and girls as the managers of water resources at the household level and

oftentimes at the community level? So we have some preliminary research from partners like UNICEF that show that if you educate adolescent boys in menstrual hygiene management, whether it is part of a life skills curriculum or part of a health class, there tends to be a decrease in bullying and harassment of girls, because you do see that, you know, girls are teased because they are menstruating or they don't come to school, or it's something that adolescents pick up on. So this is one of the promising practices that we would like to investigate further.

GWR: Taking a step back for a moment, when we think about the sustainability of water and sanitation improvements, and the importance of local buy-in and local ownership of these improvements, why is women's involvement so critical?

SC: Well, the simplest answer would be you can't ignore half the population. So, that's really the foundational argument, is that if we're serving communities and responding to their needs, you have to be as inclusive as possible, and women make up fifty percent of the population wherever we work. And the second point would be that now we have tons of data that show involving women, either involving them or having them perform various non-traditional roles in the water sector, such as technicians and engineers, invariably leads to improved development outcomes. And that's why the Agency has always been a big champion of gender integration, because in the end, you have more sustainable results and more cost-effective results.

The other argument, too, is that when you include women and girls in the water sector, you have a multiplier effect, because it's not just water, it's also education and health and economic opportunities that are improved. And the challenge now for us is how do we use participation in the water sector as a pathway for women's empowerment. So one area that we are looking at is improving women's participation in water utilities—training them to be engineers and technicians, networking and professional development, educating the private sector. You know, there's a lot of potential in that kind of work, and again, it leads to greater sustainability.

GWR: Well, thanks so much Sylvia for taking the time to speak with us. For more information about USAID's work on the intersection of gender and water, sanitation, and hygiene, have a look at the links below, and for the latest updates on USAID programming on water and gender, be sure to follow the Water Team on Twitter @USAIDWater. And if you have a topic you would like to see us cover in a future edition of the podcast, drop us a line at waterteam@usaid.gov.

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