

Women's network initiative to empower female professionals in WASH

Contributed by Dr Leticia Ackun, Gender Specialist, African Water Association (AfWA)



Figure 1 – Source: AfWA

Summary

Though women predominantly use and manage water and sanitation at the household level, they are rarely given a seat at the decision-making table where the policies that heavily affect them are made. At the professional level, women face challenges spanning from attraction, recruitment, retention, and growth in the sector (World Bank, 2019). This is common not only in the WASH sector, but other male dominated sectors.

The African Water Association (AfWA), an international non-governmental organization with water utilities and operators as members, in its effort to change the narrative, established the Women Professional Network in WASH to increase women's participation in decision making at all levels within the utilities and the local communities through the implementation of special programmes on gender. Some of these programmes include capacity building of female members on leadership,

mentorship and coaching skills aimed to equip them as leaders within their organization, School fairs are organised to encourage young girls to go into Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to broaden the base of women participation in WASH. So far 15 networks have been formed across Africa. The networks are in Guinea Conakry, Malawi, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibuti, Cameroon, Mali, Benin, Central African Republic, Togo and Burkina Faso. They all work towards creating visibility of women professionals, empowering them and mentoring the younger ones.

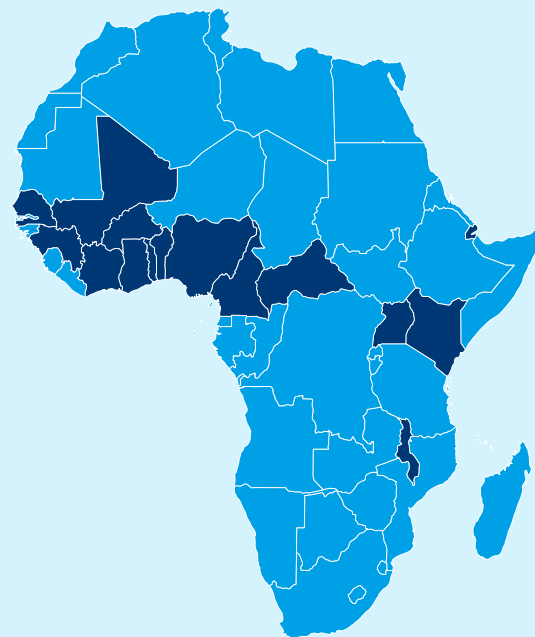
Many of the women have seen tremendous progression in their career as a result of their involvement in the activities of the networks including promotion into senior management positions.

Overview

Geographical information

Country: Guinea Conakry, Malawi, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Cameroon, Mali, Benin, Central African Republic, Togo, and Burkina Faso

City population: 516,000,000



Problem

- Women are rarely given a seat at the decision-making tables where policies, which heavily affect them, are crafted.
- Few women are found in the WASH sector.
- Many girls do not go into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) due to some socio-cultural norms and lack of role models contributing to the low number of women in WASH.
- The working environment is not conducive and friendly to retain the few women in the sector.
- Women's promotion is normally stalled which slows their professional growth.

Solution

- Launch of the African Professional Women's Network in WASH network, in response to the low female representation within AfWA's governing bodies and membership.

Problem

Only 23% of engineers and managers in water utilities are women (IWA, 2016). While much progress has been made, the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that over 50% of companies surveyed in 2018 have low representation of women on their boards (less than 30%) and over 13% have all-male boards (ILO, 2019). This was also confirmed by an assessment by AfWA in 2019 which identified a significant gender imbalance in leadership, especially at the board level with all board members being males. A study by the World Bank in 64 water and sanitation utilities in 28 economies revealed that on average women represent less than 18% of a utility's workforce and less than 25% managers and engineers are female. Not only are women underrepresented in water utilities, but they also leave water jobs at higher rates than men and face significant barriers throughout their careers (World Bank, 2019). This is an indication that there is yet more to be done to increase the percentage of women in male-dominated organizations/institutions, including the WASH sector.

The reasons for women's underrepresentation and leaving the sector include lack of family-friendly policies, lower wages, discrimination and harassment in the workplace, such as sexual harassment, and fewer training or networking opportunities. Childcare and lactation facilities, for example, were lacking across the utilities that were surveyed, and this was coupled with the lack of flexible working hours and inadequate sanitation facilities. All these factors make it difficult for women to thrive, so they end up resigning. This contributes significantly to the attrition rate of women in male-dominated organizations.

Increasing women's participation in water utilities benefits women, communities and the organization. Women tend to gain access to more and better jobs; communities also gain better representation in water-managing bodies. Gender-diverse companies in the private sector were found to report higher profits, benefit from more innovation, make better decisions, have more satisfied customers and stronger governance, among other benefits outlined in the report (World Bank, 2019).

There are many interventions and promising approaches that utilities can introduce to address these barriers and to attract, retain and contribute to the growth of women in the sector. One of such initiative is establishing of the women professional in the WASH network.

Solution

At the 18th Congress of AfWA held in Nairobi in February 2016 women representatives from the water, sanitation and environment sector launched the African Professional Women in WASH networks, in response to the low female representation within AfWA's governing bodies and membership, and given the persistent water, sanitation, environment and hygiene related challenges facing their utilities.

The launch was also in response to low attraction, recruitment, retention, and limited growth of women professionals in the WASH sector. At present, 15 networks have been established with the hope of covering the entire African continent in the future. Table 1 shows the different networks and their location. Thirteen of them are registered in their respective countries. Two are in the process of completing their registration and others are being formed.

Table 1

No.	Country	National Network	Acronym
1	Côte d'Ivoire	Réseau Ivoirien des Femmes Professionnelles de l'Eau et de l'Assainissement (Ivorian Network of Professional Women in WASH)	RIFPEA
2	Sénégal	Réseau Senegalais des Femmes Professionnelles de l'eau et de l'Assainissement (Senegalese Network of Professional Women in Water and Sanitation)	RFPEAS
3	Mali	Réseau Malien des Femmes Professionnelles de l'eau et de l'Assainissement (Malian Network of Professional Women in Water and Sanitation)	REMAFPEA
4	Cameroon	Réseau des Femmes Professionnelles de l'Eau et de l'Environnement du Cameroun (Network of Professional Women in Water and the Environment of Cameroon)	AFPEEC
5	Malawi	Women in Water-Malawi Chapter	WWMC
6	Guinée Conakry	Réseau des Femmes Guinéennes Professionnelles de l'Eau et de l'Assainissement (Réseau des Femmes Guinéennes Professionnelles de l'Eau et de l'Assainissement)	REFEGPEA
7	Ghana	Professional Network of Women in WASH	WIWASH
8	Nigeria	Network Of Women Professionals in Water	WOPWASH
9	Bénin	Réseau Béninois des Femmes Professionnelles de l'Eau et de l'Assainissement (Beninese Network of Professional Women in Water and Sanitation)	RBFPEA
10	Djibouti	Reseau Djiboutien Des Femmes Professionnelles De L'eau Et L'assainissement (Djiboutian Network of Professional Women in Water and Sanitation)	REDFEPEA
11	Kenya	Women in Water and Sanitation Association	WIWAS
12	Uganda	Professional Women for Water and Sanitation Uganda	PW4WATSAN
13	République Centrafricaine	Réseau Centrafricain des Femmes Professionnelles de l'Eau et l'Assainissement (Central African Network of Professional Women in Water and Sanitation)	RECAFPEA
14	Burkina Faso	Reseau Burkinabe Des Femmes Professionnelles De L'eau, L'environnement Et L'assainissement (Burkinabe Network of Professional Women in Water, Environment and Sanitation)	RFPEEA-BF
15	Togo	L'Association des Femmes Professionnelles de l'Eau et de l'Assainissement à la Société Togolaise des Eaux (The Association of Professional Women in Water and Sanitation at the Togolese Water Company)	AFPEA-TdE

Members are engineers, technicians, administrators, academicians, consultants, contractors and other professionals in WASH, coming from utilities, regulatory bodies, local government, civil society organizations and the private sector. Networks normally have their base within the water utilities.

The aims, among others, are to:

- build women's leadership in the water, sanitation, and environmental sector
- contribute to gender mainstreaming in the operations and programmes of organizations/institutions
- support the development and implementation of gender operational policies and raise awareness about gender issues among managers and decision-makers.
- act as a platform to build the capacity of members on leadership positions through training, mentorship, and coaching

- increase the visibility of women and showcase their contribution to the WASH sector through participation in international conferences.
- create an exchange forum to share knowledge and best practices to motivate women to become more involved in the solutions for water and sanitation and to aspire in their profession.

Major programmes undertaken by the network include capacity building of members through webinars, conferences, forums and exchanges and participation in AfWA Scientific and Technical Council Meetings. The networks also undertake mentorship programmes for members in the workplace and organize mentorship programmes for girls in schools.

They source funding to support network activities and the general cause, commemoration of International and National sector day celebration, e.g. International Women's Day, World Water Day, Menstrual Hygiene Day, Sanitation Day, Global Handwashing Day. Networks participate in community service, e.g., community clean up and sensitization on water, sanitation and hygiene, tree planting and community sensitization programmes on issues including COVID, water management, climate change, environmental sanitation, handwashing and menstrual hygiene management.

Lessons learned

Creating a network of women professionals has served to empower women to take up higher positions within their organizations; set a platform for peer-to-peer learning where the senior professionals serve as mentors and coaches for the young professionals; and to encourage girls into STEM.

There have been difficulties when trying to combine the normal schedules of these women professionals with some of these network engagements without the support of their organisations in allocating special times for such activities. These women are expected to dedicate more (above and beyond their everyday work) to address the challenges they face. This has slowed down a lot of these networks. There is also the problem of lack of support from their male counterparts. Male engagement and broader organizational support for these dedicated girls, young professionals and women will bring about the real change.

Useful links

<https://www.afwa-hq.org/index.php/en/category-news/item/1508-9th-world-water-forum-communicate-issued-at-the-end-of-the-women-s-dialogue>

<https://www.afwa-hq.org/index.php/en/category-news/item/1470-world-water-forum-dakar-2022-the-women-in-wash-want-to-make-their-voices-heard>

<https://www.afwa-hq.org/index.php/en/category-news/item/1398-on-the-road-to-dakar-2022-the-african-water-association-is-mobilising-women-in-the-wash-sector>

<https://www.afwa-hq.org/index.php/en/category-news/item/1156-committed-women-innovate-for-access-to-water-and-sanitation-in-africa>

<https://www.afwa-hq.org/index.php/en/flash-mews/item/368-the-network-of-the-professional-women-was-born-in-nairobi>

<https://www.afwa-hq.org/index.php/en/category-news/item/1166-women-want-to-be-involved-in-the-planning-and-implementation-of-water-and-sanitation-sector-projects>

Further reading and references

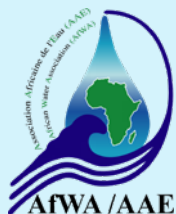
- UNDP, Africa human development report, 2016
- The International Water Association (IWA). (2016). The Untapped Resource: Gender and Diversity in the Water Workforce.
- World Bank. 2019. "Women in Water Utilities: Breaking Barriers." World Bank, Washington, DC
- ILO (2019). ILO report on Women in Business and Management: The business case for change, Geneva.

About the author

Dr Leticia Ackun is the Gender Specialist of the African Water Association (AfWA). She has over 20 years' experience working in the Public Service, with international non-governmental organizations and the United Nations implementing rural and urban water, sanitation, hygiene programmes and gender mainstreaming. She has worked with various development partners in the WASH Sector; the European Union, USAID, World Bank, Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), French Development Agency (AFD), Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS), Canada and with Government agencies. She holds a PhD degree in Sociology from the University of Ghana.

About the institution / organisation

The **African Water Association (AfWA)** is an international non-governmental organization with the mission to mobilize actors of the water and sanitation sector in Africa to strengthen their capacities and achieve sustainable access to water and sanitation services for all. Its membership comprises companies managing drinking water production and distribution, sanitation services, sector policy regulators, institutions offering water and sanitation related services, academia and individuals. The Association has over 200 members in 50 African countries and beyond. afwa-hq.org



About the IWA Inclusive Urban Sanitation Initiative

IWA's Inclusive Urban Sanitation initiative responds to a huge and growing public need - safe sanitation in combination with access to safe drinking water and hygiene underpins good health. The aim of this initiative is reshaping the global urban sanitation agenda by focusing on inclusive sanitation service goals--and the service systems required to achieve them - rather than the traditional singular focus on expanding sewer networks and treatment works. This forms part of IWA's larger agenda to promote inclusive, resilient, water-wise, and sanitation-secure cities.

About the Inclusive Urban Sanitation Stories

The Inclusive Urban Sanitation stories are documenting some of the policies, practices, and approaches that demonstrate how stakeholders especially those in urban areas (e.g., public sector, operators, academics, regulators, and other key actors) are taking part or contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 6 which require water and sanitation concepts and norms to look beyond technology and the usual focus on building infrastructure. Increased focus is on safety, inclusion, environment, public health, and multiple technology solutions tailored to different geographies and socio-economic contexts for building climate-resilient cities. The stories aim to inspire urban stakeholders to discuss ways for advancing inclusive urban sanitation, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

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the international
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