



Female entrepreneur in onsite sanitation in Benin @ USAID-MuniWASH, June 2022

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN BENIN'S SANITATION SECTOR: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

SUMMARY

The West Africa Municipal Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (MuniWASH) Activity is a five-year water and sanitation project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire. The West Africa Municipal Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (MuniWASH) Activity MuniWASH studied the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the WASH sector in Benin and identified factors that hinder their participation. MuniWASH is a five-year water and sanitation project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire and MuniWASH is using the findings from this study to inform its approach to empowering women entrepreneurs in WASH.

The Activity interviewed 20 women entrepreneurs about their personal and professional journeys in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector. The interviewees revealed various exogenous factors that impede women's active participation in WASH. These factors include sociocultural, financial, and institutional and regulatory obstacles. Socio-cultural barriers, such as gender norms and stereotypes, restrict women's access to resources, networks, and opportunities. Financial challenges, such as limited access to credit and capital, further hamper potential entrepreneurial endeavors and expansion. Finally, institutional and regulatory frameworks pose hurdles that create additional barriers to women's entrepreneurship. Despite these challenges, the interviewees also highlighted the positive impact of recent legislative and regulatory measures in Benin such as the adoption of the national gender policy and the enactment of laws pertaining to equity in the workplace. Leveraging these legal advancements, the USAID MuniWASH project has successfully enhanced women's capacities and facilitated their access to credit, aligning seamlessly with the existing legal frameworks.

Addressing the obstacles faced by women entrepreneurs in the WASH sector requires comprehensive strategies that target socio-cultural norms, improve financial inclusion, and address institutional and regulatory barriers. By implementing supporting activities, such as capacity building initiatives and mechanisms, to improve access to credit, there is potential to create a robust enabling environment for women entrepreneurs in WASH. In using such measures, MuniWASH has successfully enhanced women's capacities and facilitated their access to credit, in alignment with existing legal frameworks. MuniWASH uses these structural changes to empower more women entrepreneurs to participate in the WASH sector and to realize better outcomes when they do.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, women's entrepreneurship has experienced significant growth worldwide. According to a World Bank study entitled, "The Potential of Women Entrepreneurs in Africa," women play a dominant role in various trade sectors across the continent. In Benin, the number of businesses created by women has more than doubled between 2019 (8,936) and 2022 (18,764). Women now represent 33% of the 56,579 new businesses established in Benin in 2022 (CNUCED 2023). However, despite their strong presence in entrepreneurship, women remain largely underrepresented in the WASH sector where it is difficult to find enterprises led by women. To understand the challenges women entrepreneurs face in WASH, MuniWASH conducted an analysis in November 2022. The project aims to incorporate gender mainstreaming in all its interventions to foster inclusivity and equity for all private actors involved in the sanitation value chain.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

MuniWASH's study used two approaches to understand the barriers that hinder women's participation in the private WASH sector, focusing specifically on the sanitation subsector:

Desk study / Literature Review: The MuniWASH team conducted research and compiled data from company records and specific study reports related to women entrepreneurs and workers in the sanitation field in Benin.

Key Informant Interviews with Women Entrepreneurs: The project team interviewed 20 women entrepreneurs, managers, or individuals associated with WASH structures or companies for detailed insight regarding barriers faced. The sample of 20 women entrepreneurs was deliberately chosen, considering relevant criteria such as geographical diversity, company size, sector-specific experience, type of business activity, among others. The selection of 20 women entrepreneurs was made to ensure ample diversity across various parameters such as location, company size, sector, and age. This quantity enables the acquisition of comprehensive and representative data, ultimately reaching a saturation point where further information collection would yield redundancy, signifying adequacy for our study. As a result, the demographic characteristics of the women interviewed exhibit significant diversity, encompassing a wide range of profiles, and making it a representative sample of the sector. Through the trajectories of their personal and professional stories, the study identified the challenges faced and the potential solutions they envisioned.

The participants in the interviews ranged in age from 25 to 45 years and the majority were married with at least one child. Some of the participants focused on onsite sanitation while others operated vacuum trucks. Women entrepreneurs play a management and leadership role. They oversee operations, make strategic decisions, and collaborate with their male counterparts who operates the vacuum trucks.

A few received supports from their spouses in their entrepreneurial endeavors. Their husbands encourage them and often help them financially. Business owners frequently collaborated with men, especially in emptying companies.

FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

The literature review and the key informant interviews resulted in the following observed obstacles:

Socio-cultural Obstacles: In Benin, although women constitute 51.5 percent of the overall population and represent 36 percent of the working population, their participation remains limited due to the stigmatization in the WASH sector. In the interviews, women entrepreneurs reported being met with resistance from community members who were opposed to their working in the WASH sector. The women faced opposition not only from other women but also from men who perceived their involvement in WASH as a challenge to traditional gender roles. The traditional perception is that women should focus on cleaner activities, leaving arduous, dirty, and dangerous tasks to men.

Economic and Financial Obstacles: The interviewees reported facing discrimination when trying to access capital and financial support. Men had relatively more opportunities for credit and financing through banks and financial institutions. In addition, the respondents reported a general lack of financial assistance from spouses and family members. When seeking financial support from spouses or family members, the interviewees often encountered the argument that WASH is not a suitable domain for women. Many women entrepreneurs felt compelled to give up their endeavors due to the difficulties and burdens they experienced. Of the women entrepreneurs surveyed, 80% reported that they had to terminate their projects due to the challenges and burdens they faced.

Institutional and Regulatory Obstacles: the majority of women entrepreneurs operate within the informal sector, which restricts their access to certain opportunities. They express the need to invest considerable time in administrative procedures, particularly when interacting with staff employed in administrative services. During these interactions they often encounter condescending attitudes and unequal treatment, compared to their male counterparts. The registration process and respect for legal formalities can prove extremely complex. It generally involves navigating within the bureaucracy complex to obtain licenses and necessary permits. Unfortunately, these procedures are sometimes characterized by their protracted duration, a fact which can discourage women entrepreneurs who are obliged to navigate between domestic burdens and childcare. Discriminatory practices are also prevalent, such as prolonging their waiting time and prioritizing men's cases. Additionally, there is a lack of widespread awareness regarding the legal provisions that promote gender equality such as:

- The Constitution of Benin which confers equal rights upon both men and women.
- The National Policy for the Advancement of Women, adopted on January 31, 2001, outlines strategic orientations aimed at "empowering women economically" and "improving and upholding women's legal and social status."
- The Declaration of the Population Policy of Benin, issued in June 2006, seeks to create favorable conditions for the full participation of women in the development process and their equitable enjoyment of its benefits, as indicated in objective 9.

The 2006-2011 Strategic Development Orientations, adopted by Benin, includes a goal to "enhance human capital to improve the productivity of the national economy." The realization of this objective entails, among other measures, "the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women." As per these guidelines, the promotion of gender equality encompasses (i) the promotion of women's education and training, (ii) the recognition of women's contributions to the workforce, (iii) the appreciation of cultures and traditions conducive to women's development, and (iv) the economic empowerment of women.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of widely disseminating these laws and policies to enhance understanding of women's rights. Decision makers should leverage media channels to effectively inform and educate women working in WASH about their legal protections.

RESULTS

MuniWASH implemented a strategy to enhance the performance of women-owned and operated businesses, which include training women entrepreneurs and employees in concepts related to gender, female leadership, and better business management using the Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) program.¹ MuniWASH also facilitated access to credit from financial institutions by assisting them in developing business plans. As a result, 26 women received capacity building training on gender concepts, female leadership, and SIYB.

Training and capacity building: The study identified the specific needs of women entrepreneurs in the WASH sector. So, whenever MuniWASH provides training, these are taken into account.

¹ <https://www.ilo.org/empent/areas/start-and-improve-your-business/lang--en/index.htm>

Access to credit: The study showed that women encountered difficulties in obtaining credit. They have followed the Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB)² program, and some are part of the cohort of entrepreneurs that MuniWASH accompanies to Microfinance for access to credit.

In summary, MuniWASH has adapted its strategy in line with the results of the study, offering targeted training, facilitating access to credit, and promoting female leadership to support women entrepreneurs in the WASH sector.

The post-training monitoring of women entrepreneurs has revealed a significant enhancement in their self-confidence, enabling them to operate their businesses more efficiently. Noticeable progress has been observed in various aspects, including accounting, program development, and customer relationship management. Additionally, regarding access to credit, two female-owned businesses are currently in the process of becoming beneficiaries of the initial microcredit cohort.

Throughout the three-month follow-up period following the training, these women have reported a notable increase in the income generated by their businesses, indicating a positive impact from the training.

LESSONS LEARNED

The analysis of gender issues in the WASH sector revealed several important lessons:

Awareness and Training: Providing awareness and training opportunities for women entrepreneurs boosts their confidence and self-esteem, facilitating their integration into the private WASH sector. Equipping women with new knowledge and partnering with supportive organizations empowers them to enhance their performance and competitiveness alongside their male counterparts.

Access to Finance: Being able to access finance with favorable terms and conditions is an important motivator for women entrepreneurs. By providing technical assistance to increase access to loans from microfinance institutions, entrepreneurs can have the opportunity to strengthen the operational reliability of their businesses. The women interviewed emphasized the importance of integrating gender considerations into national policies and programs for finance, which they believe will facilitate women's participation and empowerment in WASH. These activities can be accompanied by awareness-raising initiatives targeting stakeholders, such as policymakers, funding agencies, and local communities. These initiatives can highlight the challenges and opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the WASH sector and create a stronger enabling environment.

Networking and Advocacy: Establishing networks for women entrepreneurs can be advantageous, providing a platform for experience sharing and advocating for their concerns. Women entrepreneurs strongly desire support from partners in this regard.

During MuniWASH training sessions, women entrepreneurs greatly benefited from engaging in discussions and interactions with their peers, which facilitated networking opportunities. These interactions enabled them to exchange experiences, share insights, and propose practical solutions tailored to the specific challenges within the WASH sector.

² The [Start and Improve Your Business](#) (SIYB) programme is a management training programme of the International Labor Office with a focus on starting and improving small businesses as a strategy for creating more and better employment for women and men, particularly in developing economies.

Subsequent follow-up questionnaires revealed that a significant majority of female participants found these exchanges to be highly valuable for their professional development. Such interactions not only bolstered their self-assurance but also contributed substantially to the acquisition of vital skills crucial for their success.

Furthermore, MuniWASH established a gender-specific WhatsApp platform to facilitate continuous sharing of experiences among women entrepreneurs. This platform has evolved into a dynamic space where participants regularly discuss their challenges, celebrate successes, and provide one another with valuable support.

CONCLUSION

In Benin, women entrepreneurs in the WASH sector face socio-cultural, financial, and institutional and regulatory barriers. These exogenous factors impede women's ability to fully leverage the opportunities provided by legislation for their participation in the WASH sector. Supporting professionalization and facilitating access to finance through the development of business plans by initiatives like MuniWASH present valuable opportunities for women to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of their businesses. Equity and inclusion can be effectively addressed through these measures.

In Benin, there is undeniable recognition of the formidable array of socio-cultural, economic, financial, institutional, and regulatory barriers that confront women entrepreneurs, particularly in the WASH sector. These external factors have long acted as impediments to their entrepreneurial growth, limiting their capacity to fully harness the opportunities presented by legislation designed to empower them and facilitate their active engagement in advancing the WASH sector at the national level.

Nevertheless, it is equally undeniable that initiatives such as MuniWASH, aimed at empowering women entrepreneurs, offer distinct advantages to stakeholders within the WASH domain. Empowering women entrepreneurs enhances their economic competitiveness, facilitating the development of sustainable and prosperous businesses. When these women succeed, they not only generate employment opportunities but also stimulate economic growth, ultimately contributing to poverty alleviation in Benin.

Furthermore, such empowerment initiatives promote equity and inclusivity by dismantling gender-based barriers, bolstering women's involvement in leadership positions, and fostering equal opportunities for all segments of society.

Keywords: women entrepreneurs, water and sanitation sector, challenges, opportunities, Benin, USAID MuniWASH.

REFERENCES

Proceedings of the second international conference on economic Francophonie, entrepreneurship and the professional integration of young people and women in French-speaking Africa Mohammed V University of Rabat, March 2-4, 2020

AKOUWERABOU Lirassè ,The difficulties of access to financing:The case of Burkinabè women entrepreneurs,African management review VOL.5 (2) 2020 (PP.37-57),African management review ISSN : 2509-0097 <http://revues.imist.ma/?journal=RAM>

BSI Economics,Women's Economic Empowerment-

Economic Forum Statement (2020),“Challenges and Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs”

DOUBOGAN Yvette Onibon ,Women's entrepreneurship and development in Benin, L'HARMATTAN , 2019, 186 PAGES, ISBN: 9782343160573,Tasso Éditions de la Sorbonne | “International Journal of Development Studies” 2021/1 No. 245 | pages 251 to 253 ISSN 2554-3415 ISBN 9791035106201 DOI 10.3917/ried.245.0013

World Bank Group, (2020) Women's Participation in Water Utilities How to Overcome Obstacles, National gender promotion policy in Benin March 2008

Learning Partner

African Water and Sanitation Association (AfWASA)

Contributors

Raphaelle KOUASSI (Gender and Social Inclusion, USAID MuniWASH)

Mamadou OUATTARA (Knowledge Sharing and Learning Advisor, USAID MuniWASH)

Yadjidé ADISSODA (Deputy Chief of Party, USAID MuniWASH)

Project Details

MuniWASH is a five-year project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Started in September 2019, it is implemented by Tetra Tech with support from Population Services International (PSI) and SEGURA Consulting LLC. MuniWASH collaborates with the African Water and Sanitation Association (AfWASA) as a learning partner to capture lessons and help guide urban WASH programming.

Initial target countries: Côte d'Ivoire and Benin. Contacts: Jules Hountondji, Contracting Office Representative, jhountondji@usaid.gov or Safaa Fakorede, Chief of Party, safaa.fakorede@tetrattech.com.

Disclaimer

This learning note is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this note are the sole responsibility of Tetra Tech and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government.