



# Redefining the connections between WASH and gender: Measuring women's empowerment in WASH to support policy and practice



## Story of change: Key findings & emerging impacts

### Summary

- Women and girls are disproportionately impacted by water insecurity as they are burdened with primary responsibility for water collection and management, which produces a number of health risks and limits time for other activities.
- Gender transformative interventions, which challenge existing gender norms and power dynamics in WASH, have greater potential to address gendered inequalities than conventional approaches, and may contribute to more sustainable WASH services.
- There are limited efforts to measure the gender impacts of WASH interventions, and particularly gender transformative outcomes, leading to gaps in understanding of what works or doesn't work.
- The Empowerment in WASH Index (EWI) is a novel survey-based tool to measure agency, voice and empowerment in a WASH context.
- The EWI has been used in six countries to assess and evaluate women's empowerment, showing its potential to inform policy and practice in the WASH sector by providing more robust evidence on how to integrate gender into intervention design, monitoring and evaluation, and has been used in the [REACH-WISER](#) research.



EMPOWERMENT  
IN WASH INDEX



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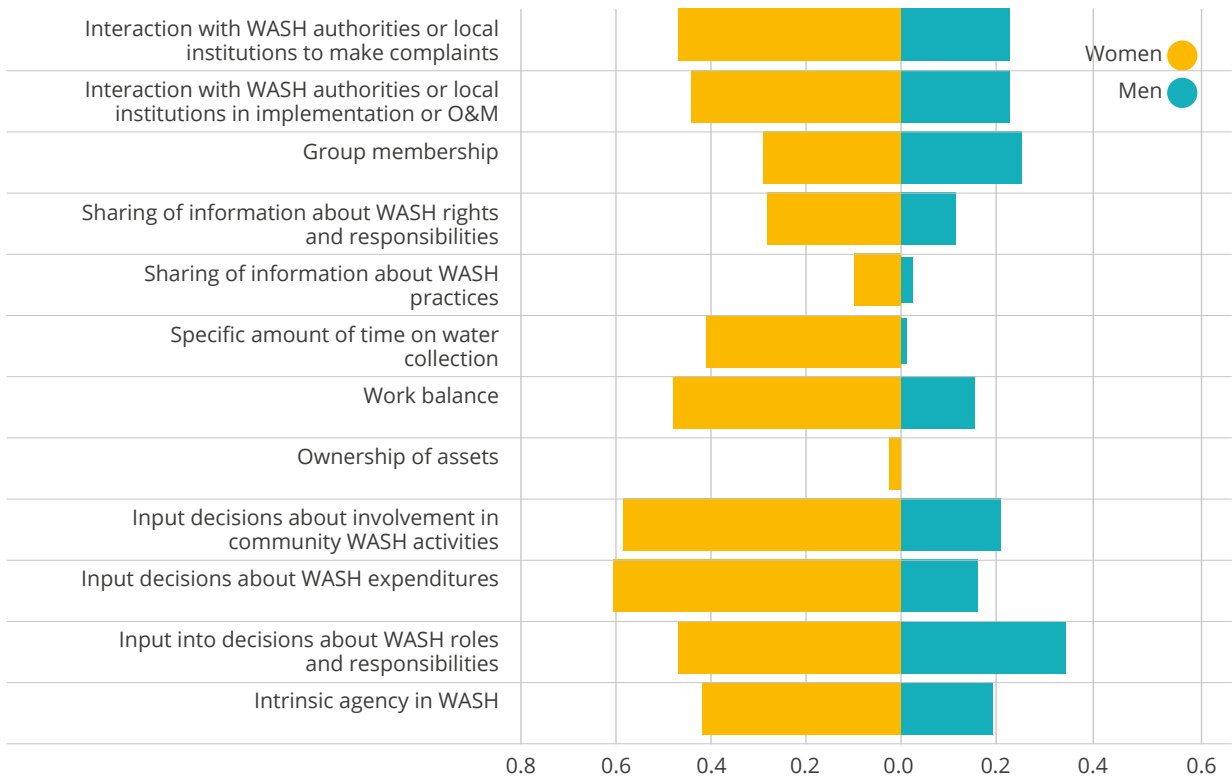
## Introduction

Improving the lives of women and girls and promoting gender equality is one of the many potential benefits of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) improvements. Inadequate access to WASH services disproportionately affects women and girls due to unpaid time spent collecting water, and associated health risks such as water carrying injuries, risks of assault when accessing WASH, and psychosocial stress resulting from dealing with chronic water insecurity.

To realize these gains, interventions must go beyond focusing on delivery of infrastructure and facilities alone, and include attention to issues such as gender and power relations within households and communities.

Yet, tools for evaluating WASH impacts have focused largely on technical standards or public health outcomes, overlooking those related to measuring gender and social equality. When gender assessments are conducted in WASH interventions, they have frequently relied on simplistic measures, such as counting participants in community meetings. Among WASH interventions assessing gender outcomes, a minority evaluate transformative outcomes like empowerment.<sup>1</sup> These gaps highlight the need for more comprehensive tools that can capture the complex relationship between WASH interventions and gender equality, going beyond basic metrics to measure meaningful and transformative change.

**Figure 1: Dis-aggregated EWI indicators for Banfora, Burkina Faso, show what contributes most to disempowerment among respondents**



1 Macura, B., Foggitt, E., Liera, C., Soto, A., Orlando, A., Del Duca, L., Carrard, N., Hannes, K., Sommer, M., Dickin, S., 2023. Systematic mapping of gender equality and social inclusion in WASH interventions: knowledge clusters and gaps. *BMJ Global Health* 8, e010850.



**Burkina Faso.**



**Market in Banfora, Burkina Faso.**

## Designing the Empowerment in WASH index to measure gender outcomes

The Empowerment in WASH Index (EWI) was developed in several steps. We employed a collaborative approach, drawing on the expertise of WASH stakeholders in West Africa to better understand the meaning of empowerment in a WASH context. We employed concept mapping, a participatory method that combines qualitative and quantitative techniques, to identify and prioritize key dimensions of empowerment relevant to the WASH sector to include in the tool (Bisung and Dickin, 2019). This process ensured that the tool was grounded in local WASH perspectives and experiences. In parallel, we drew on global empowerment literature, and adapted the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) methodology to a WASH context to create the EWI. Following pilots in West Africa, we conducted consultations with global WASH stakeholders to improve the indicators and enhance the tool's applicability across diverse contexts.

**Table 1: EWI indicators by levels of operationalization**

	Level	Indicator	
1	Individual	Gender attitudes	
2		WASH gender attitudes	
3	Household	Input into decisions about WASH roles and responsibilities	
4		Input into decisions about WASH expenditures	
5		Input into decisions about representing the household in community WASH activities	
6		Control over household assets and access to WASH loans	
7		Work balance	
8		Time for water collection	
9		Information access and sharing on WASH practice and rights information	
10	Community	Group membership	
11		Local WASH institutions and authorities	Comfort in speaking up in WASH implementation
12			Comfort in speaking up in WASH accountability

The result is a multi-dimensional tool that includes indicators from the individual, household and community levels (Table 1). Data collected from female-male pairs within households is used to inform these indicators to calculate respondents' empowerment levels and to calculate an overall EWI score.

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## Piloting the EWI in in Banfora, Burkina Faso and Asutifi North Ghana

Following the development of the EWI, we formed a research-practice partnership with IRC WASH, alongside an IRC initiative to support the development and implementation of WASH master plans in districts in Banfora, Burkina Faso (population 153,574) and Asutifi North, Ghana (population 64,262). The WASH master plans were designed to support progressive coverage of the entire population of these districts with safe and sustainable WASH services by 2030. However, little gender analysis had been conducted in the development of these plans. And furthermore, no data was available to develop gender-integrated actions to improve water security.

Photo by Sarah Dickin



### Empowerment workshop in Ghana.

Following application of the EWI, the findings in both research districts, showed that men respondents were more empowered than women respondents in WASH overall. The percentage of empowered respondents was 26% for women and 63% for men in Banfora (Burkina Faso) and 63% for women and 76% for men in Asutifi North (Ghana).

The indicators that contributed most to disempowerment for women respondents were input into household decisions on expenditures for water and sanitation, input into household decisions on who should participate in community WASH activities, workload, and comfort in interactions with WASH authorities or local institutions to make complaints about services.

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## Using the EWI to support gender mainstreaming in WASH master plans

The findings from the study were used as the basis of stakeholder workshops in both Banfora and Asutifi North to propose gender mainstreaming activities that could be carried out in the respective districts, at different entry points in the WASH system, e.g. financing, implementation, monitoring. In Burkina Faso this activity was particularly relevant as Banfora is a national WASH reference point, where learning and best practices are transferred to other regions in the country. Participants discussed whether proposed activities were gender-harmful, gender accommodating, or gender transformative. Stakeholders proposed a number of actions, for instance in Burkina Faso, a need to focus on capacity strengthening of women community members and of government officials in Banfora was identified, in order to ensure an increased role for women in WASH decision-making.

In Ghana, the importance of ensuring stakeholder engagement was highlighted, such as in activities such as town hall meetings and stakeholder review meetings on the ANAM initiative (Asutifi North Ahonidie Mpontuo – an initiative seeking to achieve a district-wide access to water), including meaningful representation of women's groups.

The importance of discussing gender inclusive planning during the ANAM partner meetings and during annual monitoring was also identified. Use of the Radio Programme and WASH Desk to promote women's and marginalised groups (e.g. youth, persons with disabilities) participation in decision-making around community WASH planning and activities was a further activity proposed.

Overall, the EWI was effective in providing stakeholders with policy-relevant evidence that could be utilized in WASH planning processes, providing a tool to support better integration of gender across WASH systems.

## Using the EWI for measuring gender impact

The EWI tool is a useful tool for WASH practitioners to evaluate gender impact following programme activities. Two contrasting examples to show how assessing empowerment in WASH can provide important insights on how WASH activities have contributed to gender equality. In the first case, the EWI was used as part of suite of tools to conduct an impact evaluation of the 'Improved WASH Services in Western Area Urban (WAU) and Western Area Rural (WAR) Districts' project' in Sierra Leone.<sup>2</sup> This was part of Oxfam's 'Effectiveness Review' where a number of completed projects are selected each year for an evaluation of their impact. This project involved conventional WASH infrastructure delivery such as construction of boreholes, community water kiosks, and public toilets.

**"Empowerment in WASH was not directly related to the project's theory of change and we did not find any significant impacts of the project [on empowerment] overall."**  
Oxfam evaluation report programme

The results showed no differences in empowerment between the project communities and the comparison communities, which suggested the project had had limited impacts on women's empowerment in WASH. In a second example, the EWI was used following implementation of the WASH SDG programme in Bangladesh.

The results showed higher women's empowerment in the WASH SDG programme areas compared to a nearby area, and this was particularly the case in terms of empowerment domains explicitly targeted by the WASH SDG programme, and to a lesser extent in other areas of empowerment. The largest contributors to empowerment were community group membership, sharing of WASH information within households, and household decision-making on WASH topics. Men were less involved in the programme activities and there were fewer differences in empowerment between men respondents in the programme and non-programme areas. One exception among men respondents was perceived WASH gender attitudes, which were more positive in the WASH SDG area.



**Community Base Monitoring Chart from the Uttaran WASH SDG WAI Bangladesh program.**

2 Vonk, J., 2022. Sustainable Water and Sanitation in Sierra Leone: Impact evaluation of the 'Improved WASH Services in WAU and WAR Districts' project. Oxfam GB. <https://doi.org/10.21201/2021.8401>

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## Conclusions

WASH interventions focusing solely on infrastructure improvements may fall short of achieving gender-transformative impacts, and it is increasingly possible to measure these impacts using the Empowerment in [WASH Index](#). Ignoring gender considerations in WASH initiatives represents a significant missed opportunity, as it severely limits the potential for meaningful gender-related impacts that can translate into a range of societal benefits. Moving forward, WASH practitioners and policymakers should consider tools such as the EWI to incorporate gender transformative perspectives throughout WASH program design, implementation, and evaluation. The tool can also play an important role in capacity development, helping WASH actors to better understand gender inequalities and how they can be addressed and mainstreamed through the WASH system.

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## Outputs

The EWI resource centre include implementation information for interested users, including the EWI survey, implementation guides, statistical codes and calculation guides. This can be found on the website: [washequity.org](http://washequity.org)

## Journal articles

Bisung, E., Dickin, S. 2019. Concept mapping: Engaging stakeholders to identify factors that contribute to empowerment in the water and sanitation sector in West Africa. *SSM – Population Health*, 9, 100490. doi: [10.1016/j.ssmph.2019.100490](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2019.100490)

Dery, F., Bisung, E., Dickin, S., Atengdem, J. 2021. [‘They will listen to women who speak but it ends there’: examining empowerment in the context of water and sanitation interventions in Ghana](#). *H2Open Journal*, 4, 231–243.

Dery, F., Bisung, E., Dickin, S., Dyer, M. 2019. Understanding empowerment in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH): a scoping review. *Journal of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Development*, 10, 5–15. doi: [10.2166/washdev.2019.077](https://doi.org/10.2166/washdev.2019.077)

Dickin, S., Bisung, E., Nansi, J., Charles, K. 2021. Empowerment in water, sanitation and hygiene index. *World Development*, 137, 105158. doi: [10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105158](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105158)

## Policy briefs

[Measuring empowerment in WASH](#) (Policy brief Ghana). Authors: Bori, S., Dickin, S., Bisung, E., Atengdem, J., 2019. Ghana. IRC WASH, The Hague, the Netherlands.

[Un indice pour mesurer l'influence des usagers de l'eau et de l'assainissement: notice et résultats: Burkina Faso](#). Authors: Figea, H., Dickin, S., 2019. IRC WASH, The Hague, the Netherlands.

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## Story of change themes



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REACH is a global research programme to improve water security for the poor by delivering world-class science that transforms policy and practice. The REACH programme runs from 2015–2024 and is led by Oxford University with international consortium of partners and funded with UK Aid from the UK Government’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. Project code 201880.