GENDER JUSTICE IN THE WASH SECTOR

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Introduction

In the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector, gender equity is not just a moral imperative but a practical necessity for promoting inclusivity, equality, and empowerment for all. Recognising the pivotal role of gender equality in fostering a sustainable and impactful WASH sector, it is essential to prioritise inclusivity and equality across all levels and facets of the workplace. By championing initiatives that promote diversity, respect, and fairness, we can cultivate a working environment that not only advances gender equality but also drives positive social change and improves the overall effectiveness of WASH programs.

Gender disparities in the WASH sector can significantly impact the accessibility and quality of services provided, especially for women and girls who often bear the brunt of inadequate WASH facilities. [1] Ensuring gender equity involves addressing systemic barriers, empowering women in leadership roles, and integrating gender perspectives into all WASH policies and practices. By doing so, we not only enhance the sector's operational efficiency but also contribute to broader developmental goals such as health, education, and economic growth.

To achieve gender justice in the WASH sector, comprehensive strategies must be implemented, including targeted actions, continuous monitoring, and a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation. This document outlines key recommendations for fostering gender equality and creating a more inclusive and effective WASH sector for all.

Current state assessment

- Primary sectors and professions represented in the WASH field

These sectors and professions collaborate to address challenges related to safe drinking water, hygiene, and sanitation. Their collective efforts are particularly crucial in the Balkan region, where they focus on improving access to these necessities in rural areas and other underserved communities.

  - Engineering: Professionals in engineering play a crucial role in designing, constructing, and maintaining water and sanitation infrastructure. They ensure access to clean water and proper sanitation by developing innovative solutions to meet the needs of various communities, especially in challenging environments.

[1] based on partner's experience

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- **Service providers:** Individuals working directly in service provision are responsible for the operation and maintenance of water supply systems, sanitation facilities, and hygiene services. They ensure the consistent delivery of these essential services to communities, addressing both urban and rural needs.
- **Education and Training:** Educators and trainers are essential in raising awareness about proper hygiene practices, sanitation, and the importance of clean water. They develop and deliver educational programs and materials to communities, schools, and other institutions to promote sustainable WASH practices.
- **Policy-Making and Governance:** Policy-makers within governmental departments and organisations contribute to shaping regulations, policies, and initiatives that promote water safety, sanitation, and hygiene practices. Their work ensures that WASH strategies are integrated into broader development goals and that there is adequate funding and support for WASH projects.
- **Community Engagement and advocacy:** Professionals in this sector work closely with local communities to understand their needs and preferences, ensuring that WASH initiatives are culturally appropriate and community-driven. They also advocate for the rights to clean water and sanitation at local, national, and international levels.
- **Health and Social Sciences:** Experts in health and social sciences research the impacts of WASH conditions on public health and social well-being. They provide evidence-based recommendations to improve WASH services and address issues such as waterborne diseases and the social implications of inadequate sanitation.

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- **Distribution of gender identities among employees**

The available data indicate that the region is characterised by patriarchal gender norms, which historically have led to disparities in employment opportunities between men and women [1]. Despite efforts made to promote gender equality, challenges persist in changing traditional mentalities towards gender roles. The response rate of recent surveys inquiring about the gender identity of employees in Albania and Serbia indicated that 82%-92% of the participants were male [2]. This shows that the WASH sector remains highly male-dominated. In North Macedonia, the survey showed a smaller disparity between genders in participation, with 52% of the participants being female and 48% being male [2]. Moreover, 68% of participants in Albania admitted that they had not received any training on gender justice, indicating the need for knowledge sharing [2].

- **Gender disparities across different roles**

The available data highlights significant gender disparities across different roles in Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) jobs in the Balkan region. Women face considerable challenges in accessing paid work due to traditional norms and a lack of care services, contributing to a regional gender gap in labour force participation of 22.5 percentage points. Women predominantly bear the burden of unpaid work in households, which impacts their participation in paid employment. Cultural norms that promote a traditional division of labour further exacerbate these disparities. Although there has been some progress in female representation in legislative branches and private-sector management, women's participation in executive decision-making roles remains significantly lower than men's across regional economies. Recent surveys indicate that the small proportion of women working in the WASH sector (10-20%) highlights unequal structures and opportunities [2]. In the case of Albania's survey, this figure goes up to 43%, highlighting an increasing trend [2]. Specifically, around 10% of female participants regularly experience discrimination, and approximately 20% report a lack of inclusive decision-making in their organisations [2]. Moreover, 43% of Albanian participants admit that there are no gender justice policies [2].

[2] Based on this project's conducted survey in the Balkan Region

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These disparities underscore the need for targeted efforts to address gender inequalities and promote inclusivity within the WASH sector in the Balkan region. By implementing strategies that challenge traditional gender norms, provide support for unpaid care work, and promote female representation in decision-making roles, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive WASH sector. The following recommendations will provide guidance for these changes.

Recommendations for action

Organisational policies and culture

Leadership representation

Ensuring balanced representation across genders at both the general employee level and in leadership roles involves assessing gender distribution to identify any disparities and promote equality. This evaluation is crucial for creating a diverse and inclusive work environment that reflects the broader society and provides equal opportunities for all individuals.
Balanced representation across genders fosters diversity of thought, enhances decision-making processes, and promotes a more inclusive organisational culture. It helps prevent biases, encourages innovation, and reflects a fair and equitable workplace environment.

1. Organisations can conduct regular gender audits to analyse the gender composition of their workforce at all levels, including leadership positions.
2. Organisations should set binding targets for gender balance and implement strategies to address any imbalances, such as targeted recruitment efforts or leadership development programs for underrepresented genders.
3. Organisations can work towards achieving a more equitable representation across all roles.

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Inclusive Policies and Practices

In order to reach gender equality in employment, and especially in WASH jobs, it is crucial to establish and maintain policies and practices that are inclusive. These policies and practices will ensure that the needs, safety and equal opportunity of all employees will be met.

- Flexible Work Arrangements: Offering flexible work hours, remote work options, and part-time opportunities to accommodate diverse needs, especially for those with caregiving responsibilities.
- Parental Leave: Implementing equitable parental leave policies that support all parents, regardless of gender, to balance work and family responsibilities.
- Anti-Discrimination Policies: Enforce strict anti-discrimination policies and create a safe environment where employees can report discrimination or harassment without fear of retaliation.
- Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs: Developing mentorship and sponsorship programs to support the career advancement of underrepresented genders and provide them with opportunities to develop leadership skills.
- Training and Development: Providing regular training on unconscious bias, diversity, and inclusion to educate employees and leaders about the importance of gender equality and how to contribute to a supportive workplace culture.

Cultural Change and Advocacy

Equality can only be truly achieved if the culture of a society values inclusivity and diversity. This can be achieved by continuously implementing advocacy for equality and against discrimination. Employers and organisations can implement the following recommendations and foster a supportive environment that not only advances gender equality but also enhances overall organisational performance and employee satisfaction.

1. **Celebrate Diversity:** Recognise and celebrate diverse cultural and gender-related events to foster a sense of belonging and appreciation among employees.
2. **Employee Resource Groups:** Support the formation of employee resource groups (ERGs) that provide a platform for underrepresented genders to connect, share experiences, and advocate for their needs.
3. **Transparent Communication:** Maintain open and transparent communication about gender equality initiatives and progress to build trust and accountability within the organisation.

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Career advancement opportunities

Ensuring equal opportunities for career growth not only promotes fairness and diversity but also maximises talent retention, engagement, and organisational success. It fosters a culture of inclusivity where individuals are recognised and rewarded based on their skills, performance, and potential rather than gender.

1. **Equal pay:** advancement in career should be paid at the same rate for all genders based on qualifications and merit.
2. **Barriers & Biases:** Identify and address any systemic barriers or biases that may hinder certain genders from progressing in their careers.
3. **Career Growth:** Investigate if all genders have equal opportunities for career growth by examining factors such as promotion rates, access to training and development programs, and mentorship opportunities to ensure fairness and equality in advancement prospects, by:
    a. conducting regular reviews of promotion processes.
    b. providing equal access to training for skill development.
    c. establishing clear pathways for advancement based on performance.
4. **Environment:** Promote a more inclusive and merit-based work environment.
5. **Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs:** Develop structured mentorship and sponsorship programs that connect employees with experienced leaders who can provide guidance, support, and advocacy. Ensure these programs are accessible to all employees, with a focus on underrepresented genders.
6. **Bias-Free Promotion Processes:** Regularly review promotion criteria and processes to ensure they are transparent, objective, and bias-free. Implement checks and balances to monitor and address any disparities in promotion rates across different genders.
7. **Equal Access to Training and Development:** Provide all employees with equal access to training and development programs. To support continuous skill enhancement and career growth, offer various learning opportunities, including workshops, online courses, and leadership development programs.
8. **Clear Career Pathways:** Establish clear and well-communicated pathways for career advancement within the organisation. Ensure these pathways are based on performance, skills, and potential rather than gender or other non-merit-based factors.
9. **Regular Assessments and Feedback:** Conduct regular assessments of career progression opportunities and solicit feedback from employees on their experiences. Use this feedback to identify areas for improvement and implement changes to create a more equitable workplace.

10. **Supportive Policies:** Implement policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible working hours, remote work options, and parental leave.
11. Diversity and Inclusion Training: Provide ongoing diversity and inclusion training for all employees, particularly those in leadership roles. Educate staff on the importance of gender equality and how to actively contribute to a supportive and equitable workplace.
12. **Monitoring and Reporting:** Establish metrics to monitor the progress of gender equality initiatives related to career advancement. Regularly report on these metrics to maintain transparency and accountability, and to demonstrate the organization's commitment to fostering an inclusive environment.

By implementing these strategies, organizations can create a more inclusive and equitable environment that supports the career advancement of all employees, regardless of gender. This approach not only enhances individual growth and satisfaction but also drives organizational success through a more diverse and engaged workforce.

Workplace culture

Fostering an inclusive workplace culture is essential for a just and productive workspace. Integrating gender justice is essential to create a supportive and equitable environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered. A culture that prioritises inclusivity not only enhances employee morale and engagement but also contributes to organisational success by leveraging diverse perspectives and talents.

1. **Diversity:** Celebrate diversity through events, recognition programs, and communication campaigns to highlight the contributions of all genders.
2. **Safe spaces:** Create safe spaces and forums for open dialogue on gender issues, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected.
3. **Anonymous Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish anonymous surveys, suggestion boxes, and focus groups to regularly gather employee feedback on workplace culture, inclusivity, and gender equality. Use this feedback to identify areas for improvement and track progress over time.
4. **Unconscious Bias Training:** Implement regular training sessions on unconscious bias, diversity awareness, and inclusive leadership practices. These programs can help employees recognise and address their biases, fostering a more inclusive and respectful work environment.
5. **Inclusive Decision-Making:** Encourage inclusive decision-making processes by ensuring diverse representation in leadership and decision-making bodies. Actively seek and consider diverse perspectives when making organisational decisions.

6. **Promote a Collaborative Culture:** Foster a culture of collaboration where diverse viewpoints are valued and respected. Encourage teamwork and open communication to build a more cohesive and inclusive workplace.
7. **Visible Commitment from Leadership:** Ensure that organisational leaders visibly commit to and advocate for gender equality and inclusivity. Leadership should model inclusive behaviour and support initiatives that promote gender justice.
8. **Recognition and Rewards:** Recognise and reward employees who actively contribute to fostering an inclusive workplace culture. Highlighting and celebrating efforts to promote gender justice can motivate others to engage in similar initiatives.
9. **Support Networks and ERGs:** Establish employee resource groups (ERGs) and support networks that provide a platform for underrepresented genders to connect, share experiences, and advocate for their needs. These groups can also offer mentorship and professional development opportunities.
10. **Transparency and Accountability:** Maintain transparency in the organisation's efforts to promote gender equality by regularly reporting on initiatives, progress, and outcomes. Hold individuals and teams accountable for contributing to a more inclusive workplace.
11. **Cultural Celebrations:** Recognise and celebrate diverse cultural and gender-related events. This can foster a sense of belonging and appreciation among employees and promote a deeper understanding of different perspectives.

Training, support, and facilities

Training on gender justice

Providing training programs related to gender justice involves educating employees on topics such as gender equality, unconscious bias, inclusive language, and creating a respectful work environment for all genders. This training is essential to raise awareness, promote understanding, and foster a culture of respect and equality within the workplace. It helps combat stereotypes, biases, and discrimination, promoting diversity and gender equality in the workplace.

1. Organising workshops or seminars on gender sensitivity, diversity inclusion, and unconscious bias training can help employees recognise and address gender-related issues.
2. Providing resources, such as online modules or educational materials.

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Work-life balance support

Ensuring work-life balance support involves assessing the effectiveness of current policies and identifying areas for improvement to better support the diverse needs of all genders. This process aims to ensure that policies are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the varying work-life demands faced by employees. By creating an environment that supports work-life balance, organisations can improve employee satisfaction, productivity, and overall well-being.

1. **Regular Feedback and Assessment:** Conduct regular surveys, focus groups, and feedback sessions to understand employee needs and assess the effectiveness of existing work-life balance policies. Use this feedback to make data-driven improvements.
2. **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Offer flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting, flextime, compressed workweeks, and job-sharing. Ensure that these options are available to all employees, regardless of gender or role.
3. **Childcare Support:** Provide on-site childcare facilities or partner with local childcare providers to offer subsidised childcare services. Additionally, consider offering childcare vouchers or financial assistance to help employees manage caregiving responsibilities.
4. **Parental Leave Policies:** Implement equitable parental leave policies that support all parents, including extended maternity, paternity, and adoption leave. Encourage a culture where taking parental leave is normalised and supported.
5. **Wellness Programs:** Develop wellness programs that address physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Offer resources such as stress management workshops, fitness classes, mental health support, and counselling services.
6. **Encourage Work-Life Boundaries:** Promote a culture where employees feel comfortable setting boundaries between work and personal life. Encourage practices such as avoiding after-hours emails and respecting time off.
7. **Support for Caregivers:** Recognise the diverse caregiving responsibilities employees may have, including care for elders and caregiving for family members with disabilities. Offer support programs, such as caregiving leave and flexible schedules, to accommodate these responsibilities.
8. **Training for Managers:** Provide training for managers on the importance of work-life balance and how to support their team members in achieving it. Equip managers with the skills to recognise signs of burnout and address work-life balance concerns effectively.

9. **Clear Communication of Policies:** Ensure that all employees are aware of the available work-life balance policies and how to access them. Communicate these policies clearly during onboarding and through regular internal communications.
10 **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continuously monitor and evaluate the impact of work-life balance initiatives. Use key performance indicators (KPIs) such as employee satisfaction, retention rates, and productivity to assess the success of these programs and identify areas for improvement.

Facilities accessibility

Evaluating workplace facilities for inclusivity involves assessing the accessibility and inclusivity of spaces like restrooms, changing rooms, and showers to ensure they cater to the needs of all genders. By ensuring facilities are inclusive and accessible, organizations foster a culture of equality, diversity, and acceptance that contributes to employee well-being and overall workplace satisfaction.

1. **Conduct Facility Audits:** Regularly audit workplace facilities to assess their inclusivity and accessibility. This includes restrooms, changing rooms, showers, and other private spaces.
2. **Implement Gender-Neutral and Options:** Provide gender-neutral restrooms and changing facilities, in addition to gender-specific ones. Ensure these spaces are well-marked, private, and comfortable for all users.
3. **Ensure Privacy and Safety:** Design facilities to offer maximum privacy and safety. For instance, ensure that stalls in restrooms and changing rooms are fully enclosed and secure.
4. **Clear Signage:** Use clear and inclusive signage to label all facilities. Avoid using gendered symbols and instead opt for neutral or descriptive signs.
5. **Regular Maintenance and Upkeep:** Maintain high standards of cleanliness and functionality in all facilities. Regularly check and promptly address any maintenance issues.
6. **Accessible Facilities:** Ensure that all facilities are accessible to individuals with disabilities. This includes providing appropriate fixtures, ramps, and other necessary accommodations.
7. **Inclusive Design Considerations:** When designing or renovating facilities, consider the diverse needs of all employees. Engage with gender inclusivity experts and seek input from employees during the planning stages.
8. **Monitor and Review:** Continuously monitor the use and effectiveness of inclusive facilities. Conduct regular reviews to ensure they meet the evolving needs of the workforce and adjust as necessary.

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Assessing the effectiveness of gender justice initiatives

Assessing the effectiveness of initiatives in fostering inclusivity involves evaluating their impact on promoting diversity, equality, and a supportive work environment. This assessment helps organisations understand what is working well and where improvements are needed to create a more inclusive workplace culture. It is important to ensure that efforts to promote inclusivity are yielding positive results and to identify areas for enhancement.

1. **Employee Surveys and Focus Groups:** Regularly conduct anonymous surveys and focus groups to collect feedback from employees on the effectiveness of gender justice initiatives. This feedback can highlight areas of success and identify where improvements are needed.
2. **Exit interviews:** Conduct exit interviews with departing employees to gather insights on gender-related issues that may have influenced their decision to leave.
3. **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** Establish and monitor KPIs related to gender equality, such as gender representation at different levels, promotion rates, and employee satisfaction scores. These metrics provide quantifiable data to assess progress and impact.
4. **Diversity Audits:** Perform periodic diversity audits to evaluate the organisation's policies, practices, and workplace culture. These audits can identify systemic barriers to gender equality and recommend actionable steps for improvement.
5. **Impact Assessments:** Conduct impact assessments of specific initiatives, such as mentorship programs, flexible work arrangements, and diversity training. Evaluate how these initiatives have influenced workplace inclusivity and gender equality.
6. **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** Leverage insights from ERGs to understand the unique challenges faced by different gender groups and to gather suggestions for enhancing inclusivity efforts.
7. **Benchmarking:** Compare the organisation's gender equality metrics against industry benchmarks and best practices. This helps to identify gaps and areas where the organisation can learn from others.
8. **Leadership Reviews:** Conduct regular reviews with leadership to discuss the progress of gender equality initiatives and ensure they remain a priority. Leadership commitment is crucial for driving sustained change.

9. **Transparent Reporting:** Maintain transparency by regularly reporting on the progress and outcomes of gender justice initiatives. Share successes and challenges with all employees to foster a sense of collective responsibility and accountability.
10. **Continuous Improvement:** Use the insights gained from assessments to refine and improve gender justice initiatives continually. Adapt strategies based on feedback and changing organisational needs to ensure sustained progress.

Conclusion

Gender equality within the WASH sector is a multifaceted endeavour that requires a comprehensive approach to address the diverse needs and challenges faced by individuals of all genders. By integrating gender equality principles into policies, programs, and facilities, organisations can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that empowers women, men, and gender minorities alike. Prioritizing gender-responsiveness fosters greater participation, leadership, and decision-making opportunities for all individuals. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of WASH programs but also promotes social justice and equity.
Ultimately, by championing gender equality initiatives in the WASH sector, organisations can contribute to a more equitable, just, and thriving society for everyone. Embracing diversity and inclusivity within the WASH sector is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic advantage that drives innovation, improves service delivery, and strengthens community resilience.

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